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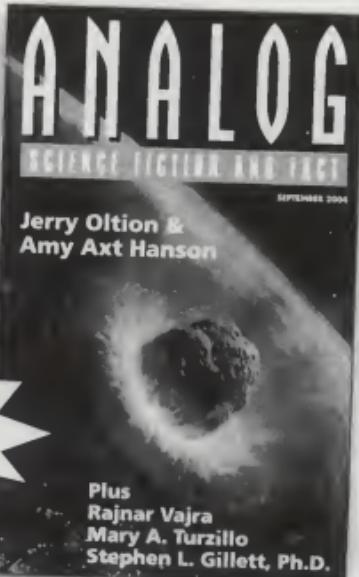
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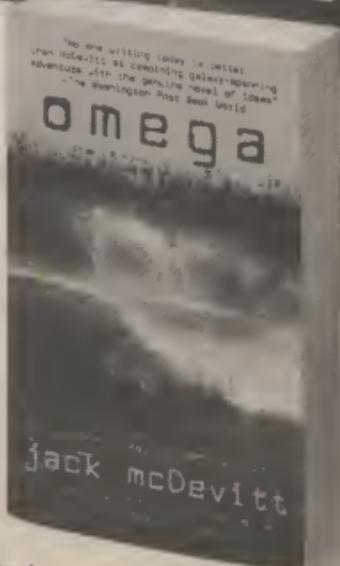
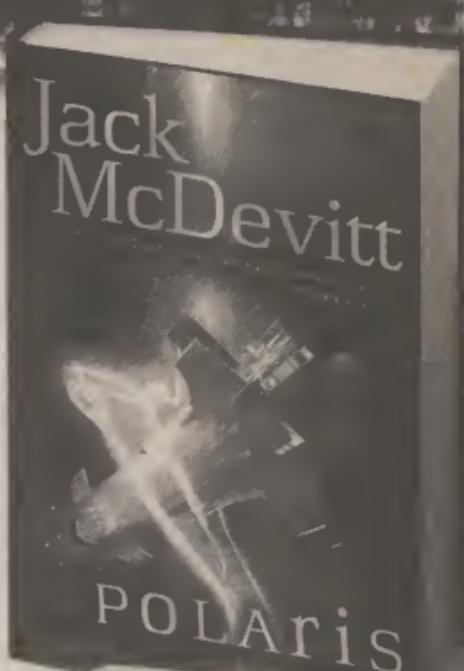
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One of the most rewarding aspects of attending the annual World Science Fiction Convention is the opportunity to meet and talk to readers of *Asimov's*. In the past, though, it hasn't always been easy to find you at the convention. Even before I became editor of the magazine, my schedule was always full. There are panel commitments, meetings with authors at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and a host of other obligations. You could grab me for a quick moment at the end of a panel, but generally, panelists are expected to exit the room and make way for the next discussion. Meanwhile, it's off to the next panel discussion or meeting for me. For the last few American Worldcons, however, we've set up a table in the convention's Dealers' Room.

Our table has been a very exciting place. The schedule there is filled with authors signing magazines and books while the associate editor of *Asimov's*, Brian Bieniowski, and *Analog's* associate editor, Trevor Quachri, work the table continuously to sell subscriptions. At the 2004 Worldcon in Boston, attendees could get signatures from Robert Silverberg, Walter Jon Williams, Nancy Kress, Esther M. Friesner, Allen M. Steele, Charles Stross, Mike Resnick, Robert Reed, and many others. Connie Willis and James Patrick Kelly actually signed on for extra hours ("were dragooned" Jim might say, but don't listen to him). In addition to

signing autographs, they, and many of our other authors, enthusiastically hawked subscriptions to Dell's two science fiction magazines.

When the lines for autographs were too long, it was often hard to find a moment to speak to subscribers. During quiet times, though, I had some delightful discussions with new and long-time readers. Many young people stopped by to say that they had only recently discovered the world of SF magazines, or that collections of science fiction magazines had been handed down to them by their parents. Sometimes their parents were there with them, writing out checks to ensure that the next generation of *Asimov's* readers lives on. A number of readers stopped by to purchase subscriptions for their local libraries, too, which I think is a terrific idea.

I had several conversations with people about the content of the magazine. It was clear that many readers like adventure stories with happy endings, but it was also clear that the people I spoke to enjoy being shocked, terrified, and saddened, too. Certainly no one was looking simply for the pat ending or for stories that repeat the same ideas over and over again.

One particularly interesting discussion I had was with a new subscriber who suggested that we have a special section on our website where we could post a reader's favorite scientific site of the month. I thought that was a very good

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idea, too, and we were going to correspond further about it in email, but I haven't heard from him since the Worldcon. So, if you are that loyal reader, or are just interested in joining this discussion, please send me email at asimovs@dellmagazines.com. It's a concept that needs reader support in the form of viable suggestions. Remember, you can use the same address to send letters for publication in the magazine. As I mentioned in my last editorial, letters can be on any subject connected to the magazine. They can be controversial, but they must be civil, and they may be edited or shortened before they appear in *Asimov's*.

Recently our parent company, Dell Magazines, has come up with another way for us to interact with our readers. In late May, they are sponsoring a science fiction cruise. Gardner Dozois and I will be aboard representing *Asimov's* and Stanley Schmidt, the editor of *Analog*, our sister magazine, will also be there. Connie Willis and Jim Kelly, as well as Kevin J. Anderson, his wife, Rebecca Moesta, and Robert J. Sawyer, have graciously agreed to come along (Connie might say they've "been shanghaied," but don't listen to her either). The ship will set sail from Port Canaveral, Florida, and will make ports of call around the Western Caribbean. Although all the usual cruise amenities will be available for our readers, only the members of our group will be allowed to attend the science fiction activities.

There will be panels, readings,

talks, movies, and writing workshops. Jim Kelly will lead an SF trivia contest, play the Mafia party game in the evening with anyone who's interested, and conduct at least one of the workshops. Connie Willis, who is as funny in person as she is in some of her fiction, will give a speech on "The Art of Comedy." There will be two cocktail parties, open only to the members of our group, and each night, the authors and editors will join different tables of cruise-goers for dinner. Each person joining the science fiction cruise will have at least one opportunity to dine with an author or editor, and the first fifty people who sign up will be able to pick the author or editor they dine with. You can find out more about the cruise at www.sciencefictioncruise.com. I hope I have a chance to share a toast with many of you.

In other news: I am pleased to congratulate two of our long-time columnists for awards they've recently received. It was quite exciting at the 2004 Worldcon to see Erwin S. Strauss (also known as "Filthy Pierre") pick up two awards. Our intrepid Conventional Calendar keeper was the winner of the E. Everett Evans "Big Heart" Award and a special Noreascon 4 Committee Award. In addition, our book reviewer, Paul Di Filippo, received the French "Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire 2005" for his short story "Sisyphus and the Stranger." We're very happy to see both of these contributors receive the honors they deserve. ○

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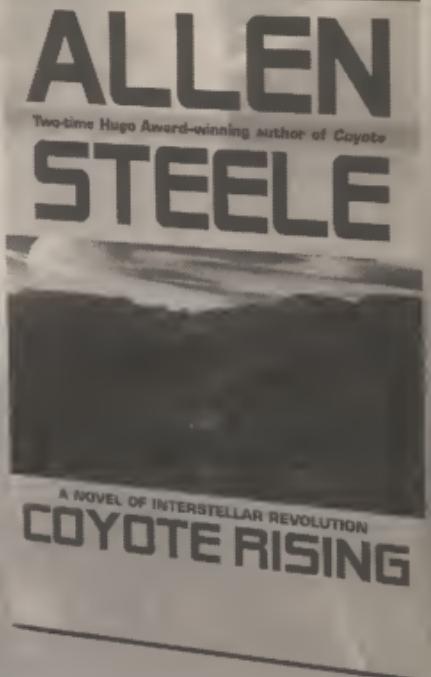
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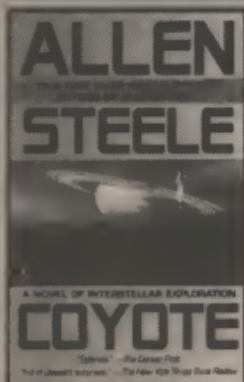
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GRAND MASTERS, THE SEQUEL

Long-term readers of this column with long-term memories may remember the following nine paragraphs, which were published here exactly four years ago, and which I am going to reprint now for reasons that I'll make clear very shortly for those who haven't already figured it out from the heading above:

The Grand Master award of the Science Fiction Writers of America is one of the two highest distinctions our field confers—the other being the Guest of Honor designation at the World Science Fiction Convention. These awards recognize a lifetime of significant work; and anyone who wants to understand the history of science fiction in the twentieth century need only look at SFWA's list of Grand Masters.

It was Jerry Pournelle, when he was President of SFWA nearly thirty years ago, who dreamed up the idea of the Grand Master award. Since 1965 SFWA had been giving its Nebula trophy annually to the authors of the best novels and short fiction of the previous year; but Pournelle felt that the accomplishments of some of our greatest figures were being slighted, because they had done their outstanding work in the years prior to the Nebula's inception. So he proposed a special award—an oversized version of the handsome block of Lucite that is a Nebula—to be awarded by vote of SFWA's officers and

past presidents in acknowledgment of the significant work those writers had done over the long term. And, to avoid cheapening the value of the award, Pournelle stipulated that it should be given no more often than six times every decade.

Pournelle's suggestion was eagerly accepted by the membership, and in 1975 the first Grand Master Nebula was given to Robert A. Heinlein, surely one of the defining figures of modern science fiction. Heinlein's recent work had come under attack by critics who found fault with it on literary and even political grounds, but no one questioned the greatness of the man who had written *Methusaleh's Children*, *Double Star*, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, and the Future History stories. (And, in fact, his career was far from over even in 1975: he would go on to produce such well-received novels as *Friday* and *The Cat Who Walks Through Walls* in the years following his receiving of the award.)

In those days nearly all the writers who had clustered around the great editor John W. Campbell of *Astounding Science Fiction* to create the so-called "Golden Age" period of the 1940s were still alive, and they were the obvious choices for grand-masterhood in the next few years. And so Jack Williamson, who had given us *The Legion of Space* back in the 1930s, and such Golden Age Campbell-era classics as the Seetee and Humanoids books, became the second Grand

Master in 1976. Clifford D. Simak, of *City* and *Way Station* fame, joined the group the following year.

Because the original rules, since amended, stipulated only six awards per decade, no Grand Master was chosen in 1978; but in 1979 another golden-age favorite, L. Sprague de Camp, he of *Lest Darkness Fall* and *The Incomplete Enchanter* and ever so much more, was honored. Another year was skipped, and then in 1980 Fritz Leiber (*Conjure Wife*, *The Wanderer*, *Gather, Darkness!*) was the pick.

Under the rules then in effect no further award could be given until 1984, when Andre Norton became the first female Grand Master (a designation that created certain grammatical problems that have never been adequately resolved) and also the first who had not been associated with the Campbell editorship.

You may be wondering, at this point, why the name of Isaac Asimov has not yet been included in the list. As it happened, Isaac was wondering the same thing, since he, too, had been a key member of the John Campbell team, and by

the 1980s the name of "Asimov" was virtually synonymous with science fiction, as the very magazine you are reading now will testify. And so, in his goodnaturedly self-promoting way, Isaac was given to observing, far and wide, that a certain conspicuous figure of the era had not yet been given his due. He said it playfully, of course, and made it clear that he was just joking—but in fact there was no small degree of seriousness beneath his clowning. He privately suspected that he was not going to live many more years, and he wanted to win that award before he died.

It is quite true that one of the considerations involved in nominating people for the award is an actuarial one. Even great writers don't live forever, and we have always tried to honor our oldest ones first. Heinlein and De Camp had been born in 1907, Williamson in 1908, Leiber in 1910, Norton in 1912, Simak all the way back in 1904. Isaac—born in 1920—was a veritable youth by comparison. No one was aware in the 1980s of how quickly Isaac's health was weakening, though. So, despite his other-



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wise quite valid claim and all his yelps, he simply had to sit by and wait, even while his great friend and rival, Arthur C. Clarke (born 1917) carried off the 1986 trophy.

But of course a group of Grand Masters of Science Fiction that did not include Isaac Asimov was plainly incomplete; and his torment came to an end in 1987 at a ceremony in New York. I went up to him afterward to congratulate him as he stood there cradling the trophy in his arms; and as I put out my hand he feigned a look of great alarm, as though I were trying to take it away from him, and cried, "You can't have it! You can't have it! You have to wait another fifteen years!"

Well, lo and behold, etc., the fifteen years predicted by Isaac went by, and two extra by way of lagniappe, as they say in New Orleans, and then in the spring of 2004 the Science Fiction Writers of America named its latest Grand Master, and indeed the award went to the writer of these very words.

I thus become the twenty-first of the Grand Masters, and although I am not the youngest to have been chosen (not only Isaac Asimov but also Heinlein and Williamson were younger at the time of winning than I am now), I am the first of the winners who was born in the 1930s, a significant generational shift. An award whose winners were, in the beginning, exclusively drawn from that gifted crew who created the John W. Campbell Golden Age of science fiction in the 1940s (Heinlein, Williamson, Simak, de Camp, Leiber), has begun to pass to the innovative figures that built on the achievements of those titans to create the SF of our own day.

Since the rules of the award stip-

ulate that it can be given only to living writers, the pool of eligible Golden Age authors eventually was used up, as Lester del Rey, Alfred Bester, A.E. van Vogt, and Hal Clement joined the ones I've mentioned above. (Theodore Sturgeon and L. Ron Hubbard, two other conspicuous figures of the Campbell era, did not live long enough to be named.) Then came a group of writers who established their claims to the Grand Master trophy in the period immediately following World War II: Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, Jack Vance, Philip José Farmer, Damon Knight, Frederik Pohl, and Poul Anderson. More recently, two writers who came to prominence a little later than that group joined the roster: Brian Aldiss and Ursula Le Guin, both of them a few years older than I am. And now it is my turn. Though my own writing career goes back to the middle of the 1950s, I didn't hit my full stride as a writer until 1966 or so, which makes me part of the Aldiss-Le Guin group rather than of the Knight-Farmer-Pohl contingent. And within the next few years we will see winners drawn from the imposing pool of writers who entered the field in the last thirty years, as the great generational wheel keeps turning.

And how do you feel, Mr. Silverberg, about winning this majestic award?

On the most obvious level, I feel terrific about it. I regard it as confirming that I did actually succeed in what I set out to do many decades ago: to write science fiction that would be as important to other readers as the science fiction of the writers I've listed above was to me in my own formative years. Since I've put in half a century of hard

work at that goal, I'm not going even to make a pretense of modesty here: I think that much of what I wrote over those decades was pretty damned good, and the fact that I've now received the Grand Master award indicates that I'm not the only one who feels that way.

But—but—there is this generational issue—

The eerie thing for me, because I *am* the first Grand Master who was born in the 1930s, is that I find myself swept up into a pantheon populated almost entirely by writers whose work I read with awe and reverence when I was twelve and thirteen and fifteen years old. I'm talking primarily about Heinlein and Asimov and van Vogt, about Vance and Leiber and Anderson, about de Camp and Bradbury and Clarke and Williamson, about—well, just about the whole bunch of

them, other than Aldiss and Le Guin. (Fine writers that those two are, they began their writing careers after I had already become an adult, and I can't look upon them in quite the same way as I do the idols of my childhood and adolescence.)

My shiny new trophy tells me that I am now regarded as the peer of all those people. But somewhere within me is what remains of my inner adolescent self, who warns me to walk humbly among them, making the proper gestures of respect, and remembering to speak softly and say "Yes, sir" when spoken to. There's something to that. A Grand Master I may indeed be, now, but in the company of Robert A. Heinlein and Jack Williamson and L. Sprague de Camp and Frederik Pohl and Clifford D. Simak I'm always going to feel like the new kid on the block. ○

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AFRAID OF THE DARKNET

morals

Say your kid sister drops by for a visit. She lives on the Left Coast and has driven clear across the country to your place on the Right Coast. To keep herself from falling asleep on the tedious stretches of I-80, she has brought along some of her CD collection. Naturally, you're interested in what she's listening to these days and, as you idly flip the pages of her CD binder, you notice that she owns **Herbie Hancock's** <http://www.herbiehancock.com> classic *Head Hunters*. You yourself bought that album on vinyl back in '74, but your ex-girlfriend sat on it during a wild Halloween party in '81. You have a CD burner on your computer, and your sister is amenable, so you make yourself a copy.

Is that wrong? What if it actually was your girlfriend's record? What if you never owned the album yourself, but you've just recently discovered Herbie's funk years?

Say you bought a membership to **ConJose** <http://www.fanac.org/conjose>, the 2002 World Science Fiction Convention <http://www.worldcon.org> and you wanted to cast an informed vote for the **Hugo Award** <http://worldcon.org/hugos.html>, so of course you read **Ted Chiang's** <http://www.fantasticmetropolis.com/show.html?iw,chiang,1> memorable *Hell Is*

the Absence of God <http://www.fictionwise.com/ebooks/Ebook4145.htm>. But you couldn't manage to round up a copy of **Starlight 3** <http://nielsenhayden.com/starlight3.html>, where it originally appeared. Not to worry; that summer you learned that **Fictionwise** <http://www.fictionwise.com> was running a promotion that allowed you to download Ted's story free for a limited time. You did and you loved it so much that you voted for it and—hallelujah!—it won. As a matter of fact, you were so impressed that you went out and bought a copy of Ted's collection, **Stories of Your Life and Others** <http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/storiesofyour.htm>.

Now back to your sister, whose Herbie Hancock album you just copied. She has never read any of Ted's stuff and naturally you'd like to educate her about the cutting edge of SF and so you offer to lend her your book. She declines because she remembers how snippy you got when she misplaced your autographed first edition copy of *Fire Watch* by **Connie Willis** <http://www.scifan.com/writers/ww/WillisConnie.asp> which would be worth well north of two hundred dollars if either of you could put your hands on it. Anyway, you tell her that at the very least she can download the free Fictionwise file of "Hell Is the Absence of God" onto

her Palm Tungsten. Except the promotion is long since over and now Fictionwise is charging \$1.25 for the story.

Is that wrong? What if you lend her your own Palm Tungsten to read it on? Or if you Xeroxed the story from your own personal copy of the book and gave it to her?

Just for the record, I don't have a sister.

DRM

Some people think that the answer to all of these questions is Digital Rights Management or **DRM** http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_rights_management. Basically DRM seeks to use a technological stick—hardware or software—to enforce copyright. It's DRM that prevents you from making backup copies of your collection of special extended **Lord of the Rings** <http://www.lordoftherings.net> DVDs. But what is convenient for Peter Jackson http://www.lordoftherings.net/film/film_makers/fi_pjack.html can be damned inconvenient for you. So be sure to wash your hands before you pick up that fragile optical disc!

In 1998 Congress passed the controversial **Digital Millennium Copyright Act** or **DMCA** <http://www.copyright.gov/legislation/dmca.pdf>. The intent of this law is to provide new protection for content creators in the face of technologies that are eroding copyright. Content creators? You know, the folk formerly known as artists, like **Steven Spielberg** <http://www.scruffles.net/spielberg> and **Outkast** <http://www.outkast.com> and me <http://www.jimkelly.net>. Among other things, the law makes

it illegal to disable DRM encryption: The DMCA mandates, "No person shall manufacture, import, offer to the public, provide, or otherwise traffic in any technology, product, service, device, component, or part thereof, that is primarily designed or produced for the purpose of circumventing a technological measure that effectively controls access to a work protected under this title." If you think about it, this is like passing a law against using your VCR to tape that episode of **Star Trek Enterprise** <http://www.startrek.com/startrek/view/series/ENT/index.html> you're going to miss while you're away on vacation. Worse, it makes a criminal of anyone who even dares to create the digital equivalent of a VCR, even if it is never used to copy anything.

In case you're wondering, DRM has long since arrived in ebook publishing. All the major ebook readers have formats that use encryption to prevent copying. All the commercial ebook publishers have recourse to these secure formats, at least for some titles. So hack **William Gibson** <http://www.williamgibsonbooks.com> at your peril!

You may recall in the last installment I called your attention to a talk about ebooks given by our own **Cory Doctorow** <http://www.craphound.com>, a frequent contributor to these pages. Cory's day job is with the **Electronic Freedom Foundation** <http://www.eff.org>, the watchdog organization that advocates on behalf of free expression in the digital age. As an EFF spokesperson, Cory has been a critic of DRMthink for some time now. Weigh his reasoning by clicking over to a **speech** <http://www.dashes.com/anil/stuff/doctorow-drm-ms.html> he gave to the Micro-

soft Research Group last June. He makes several arguments, i.e.: that DRM systems don't work; they're bad for society; they're bad for business; and they're bad for artists.

Now since I happen to be an artist . . . er . . . content creator, this last point compels *my* attention. Are DRM schemes hurting my career? I suppose the answer depends on how one defines a career. Is my career the business model through which I earn the princely sums (not!) that I am paid to commit prose in public? Is my career the collection of all the sentences I have ever typed that have gone on to be published, either in ink or in digits, even if they are now out of print? Is it the size of my readership, even if many of you have just stumbled across my stuff here in the pages of *Asimov's*? Or is it my reputation among readers who remember my work and would look for more Kelly stories if they weren't *too* hard to acquire?

The way I see it, readers and rep are what really matter to a writer. Dollars *should* follow from a satisfied readership, although exactly how this happens in these times of technological and economic innovation is not immediately apparent, alas. I do believe that the net has irretrievably compromised twentieth-century notions of intellectual property and that no amount of DRM shenanigans is going to turn back the copyright clock. Or as Cory puts it: "Technology that disrupts copyright does so because it simplifies and cheapens creation, reproduction and distribution. The existing copyright businesses exploit inefficiencies in the old production, reproduction and distribution system, and they'll be weakened by the new technology. But new technology always gives us more art with a

wider reach: that's what tech is for."

darknet

But you don't just have to take the word of a couple of tech-struck science fiction guys that DRM is doomed and copyright must be reformed. In 2002 four computer scientists working for **Microsoft** <<http://www.microsoft.com>>, Peter Biddle, Paul England, Marcus Peinado, and Bryan Willman, published a research paper entitled "**The Darknet and the Future of Content Distribution**" <<http://msl1.mit.edu/ESD10/docs/darknet5.pdf>>. What they call the *darknet* is the entire "collection of networks and technologies used to share digital content." That is to say, if you nip over to the Usenet's alt.binaries.ebook newsgroup, you are in the heart of the darknet. And despite the settlement of the **lawsuit** <<http://www.authorslawyer.com/c-ellison.shtml>> between **Harlan Ellison** <<http://harlanellison.com>> and **AOL** <<http://www.aol.com>>, access to copyright-busting newsgroups and websites is still quick and easy. But the darknet extends beyond file-sharing on the World Wide Web. If you and your hypothetical sister exchange Herbie Hancock and Ted Chiang files, you are also part of the darknet. And if you subscribe to **Consumer Reports Online** <<http://www.consumerreports.org>> and then share your password with your mom so that she can check out the best new laptops, you have both gone over to the darknet.

While this paper can be sometimes thick going for the lay surfer, it is well worth the effort, if only so

that you can understand why these particular Microsofties are so pessimistic that anything can be done to halt the spread of the darknet. (Note that this paper presents the opinions of the four authors only, and is not the official position of Microsoft.) In the last section of the paper they consider the challenges of doing business in the very near future: "... in many markets, the darknet will be a competitor to legal commerce. From the point of view of economic theory, this has profound implications for business strategy: for example, increased security (e.g., stronger DRM systems) may act as a *disincentive* to legal commerce. Consider an MP3 file sold on a web site: this costs money, but the purchased object is as useful as a version acquired from the darknet. However, a securely DRM-wrapped song is strictly *less* attractive: although the industry is striving for flexible licensing rules, customers *will* be restricted in their actions if the system is to provide meaningful security. This means that a vendor will probably make more money by selling unprotected objects than protected objects. In short, if you are competing with the darknet, you must compete on the darknet's own terms: that is convenience and low cost rather than additional security.

exit

So what happens to copyright if DRM fails? Don't ask me! Better minds than mine have yet to map out a future that is acceptable to artists, consumers, *and* business interests. However, I can point to one route to the future of publish-

ing that I have chosen for at least part of the Kelly oeuvre.

The **Creative Commons** <<http://creativecommons.org>> movement offers a way for artists to make their works freely available to the world without giving up ownership. It seeks a middle path between full copyright—all rights reserved—and the public domain. The files you can download from my site—stories, MP3 files of audio-books, and the archive of this column, for example—are offered for the free use of anyone under one of the many Creative Commons Licenses. My license imposes just three conditions: you must credit me as author, you must not use the works for commercial purposes, and you must not alter, transform, or build upon the works.

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I certainly haven't offered everything I've written under the Creative Commons license and I'm not advocating this path for everyone. But I sleep better at night knowing that anyone, anywhere who wants to can read me.

Who's afraid of the darknet? O

THE 120 HOURS OF SODOM

Jim Grimsley

Jim Grimsley is currently at work on a novel that's a sequel to his story "Into Greenwood" (September 2001), and another novel that's mainstream. In his remarkable new tale, the author borrows from the motifs of the Marquis de Sade to explore the kinds of tedium a person may face when he can live for at least two or three hundred years.

A word of warning: There are scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some.

Figg and Sade met each other over drinks in a trendy place on top of Marmigon, at a table in the lushest part of the garden, a riot of blossom and verdant foliage. The restaurant had a sarsa flower with its own bloom slave as the centerpiece of the garden, which was in turn the central fixture of the restaurant's main dining room. Figg found himself watching the bloom slave, a pretty girl of sixteen or so, throughout the course of the dinner. She curled like a lotus at the foot of the flower, stroking its lower leaves now and then. The Prudent Greenhouse served many cuisines, a menu of choices that changed, famously, each evening. The restaurant was rumored to employ nearly a thousand chefs. Tonight's theme was Post-Transit Mandarin cuisine, another example, Figg thought, of the essential sterility of Hormling culture, borrowing from the deep past.

This sense of anachronism was perfect for a dinner with Sade, who had recently renamed himself after a figure of pre-Transit history, a famous marquis of a portion of Old Earth called France. He explained this to Figg over a martini the color of a blue sky in a summer evening, a rich aqua, almost a turquoise, but deeper and darker, swirled with violet. "A marquis was a rank something like Orminy," said Sade. "This one was notable for his vices and his need to write about them."

"I know who he is. Why can't you fix your star on a more recent example of decadence?" Figg petted the spider on his own head, named Pene-

lope, who preened and spread herself toward his hand, purring like a cat. "Or have you run through all those? And you're clear back to eighteenth century France?"

"So I take it you must know something about his story." Sade was powdering himself with some sort of pleasure-inducing chemical; something called karma and another called flush were all the rage at the time.

Figg watched with a trace of hunger and continue to coddle Penelope. "Yes."

"That expensive brain of yours," Sade said, pinching a bit more powder from another container and smearing it onto the back of his hand. "Cross referenced with every sort of nonsense."

"Have you any acquaintance with his writings?" Figg asked dryly. "He is your namesake. He's thoroughly unpleasant."

"You know I haven't studied pre-Transit writers. You know I haven't studied writers at all. But I'm sure you have."

"Not personally. But I've got a good database of pre-read books; I know a good bit about him. Novels like *Justine*. And the famously lost *120 Days of Sodom*."

"Lost?"

"Yes. The manuscript was lost for several decades. This place France was having a revolution and Sade was in prison, where he wrote the book. He lost the manuscript while being moved from one prison to another. No great loss if it had never been found at all, according to most people."

Sade ogled the bloom slave, bound to the sarsa plant by long, white tendrils. The plant had been eating her for months. Figg liked the restaurant but feared it was becoming outré, the result of a fame mostly due to the fragile beauty of the sarsa slave, whose name was Purity. She was re-cumbent now on a bed of moss that looked as if it had been combed; she had blonde hair and cocoa skin, her long, bony limbs folded beneath her as she rested. Information about Purity was readily available on the Prudent Greenhouse menu, a thin, almost transparent tablet which Figg read with some amusement. Purity had traveled here from the Breeder Planet, as had the sarsa-flower. The Breeders had created the symbiosis in the first place; the sarsa fed on its human slave in such a way that it numbed the slave to any idea of any other life. Purity had, at some point, for some reason, contracted away her freedom to become plant food. Her sad story as an orphan on the most inhospitable of Hormling worlds was another commodity offered in the menu, and one could wholly believe in her sadness since here she was, draped with roots, or something much like roots, slowly digesting her.

"We have to do something for your birthday," said Sade. "And I want people to pay attention to my new name."

"No, we don't have to do something for my birthday," said Figg. "We'd all be doing me a favor by ignoring it."

"But I've never had a friend who lived to be three hundred." Sade was making a perfect pout of his lower lip, a mockery of naïve innocence. "Please, for me. I've so wanted to give a party for the longest time, and you're the only significant anniversary I know."

Sade evidenced something of a distaste for Figg's spider, particularly when she ran so nimbly out of Figg's hairdo, down his neck and arm to eat from the tray of live insects he had ordered for her. Sade stared at Penelope as if afraid she might jump. The spider's body spanned about the size of Figg's hand, partly organic and partly mechanical, effectively immortal, since none of its cellular or regulatory functions were particularly difficult to duplicate. Immortality for lower order life forms had proven relatively easy for Hormling medicology. Penelope the spider was a family heirloom, one of the older arachnoborgs in existence, nearly nine hundred years, an age of which Figg, with all his money and all his connections, could only dream.

"You need a pet," Figg said. "Something to keep you busy, other than your social life, I mean. You need something that depends on you."

"Like that?" Sade indicated Penelope, whose back was currently covered with emerald green fur the exact shade of Figg's processor vest. Penelope was stooped over her prey in an orgy of consumption, her thorax shivering with delight, mouth fixed on some kind of tropical beetle.

"Don't be rude to my spider, please."

"I don't need a pet that lives in my hair."

"In my scalp, actually. She buries her legs in my scalp. All eight."

Sade, the famously perverse child of strange pleasures, trembled with disgust, a move that appeared much like Penelope's ecstasies of suck.

Figg explained further. "I have a set of low-grade pleasure sockets the shape of the ends of her legs embedded in my scalp. Her legs are some kind of light metal, with these hairy sort of tendrils at the end. She inserts them into my skull and I get a constant rush of pleasure."

"She stabs you with those needles at the end of her legs? Those?"

"She doesn't stab me. She has transportable sockets on the tips for when she wants to sit on my arm or my shoulder."

"It comes to the same thing. You have a huge spider riding you and you think that's what I need, as a cure for my essential boredom."

"I wouldn't have gone so far as to accuse you of essential boredom."

"I assure you that I am indeed filled with ennui." Sade sighed. "But I have an idea for your party."

"Plans for which I persist in wishing you would abandon altogether."

"But I won't, and you know it. In fact, you like to protest about your party, but you'd be heartbroken if I stopped working on it."

Figg felt sincerely that this was far from the case, while at the same time he realized that only a complete rupture with Sade would stop the party from happening. Sade, under his former name, had given occasional parties that were famous throughout Marmigon, and Marmigon was the most important power center of Senal; if Sade felt the need to give a party, it might be dangerous to thwart him.

"Besides, I have an idea for the most marvelous centerpiece. Something truly new."

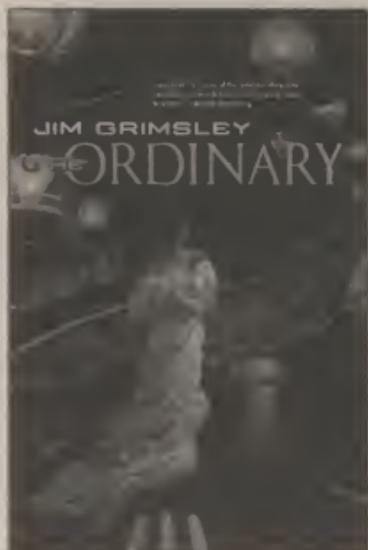
"There is nothing truly new."

"Well, then, with all the appearances and appurtenances of new. Something virtually new."

Penelope, sated with bug for the moment, pricked her legs into Figg's

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forearm and clung there. Her legs were indeed fitted with sockets that inserted themselves into any part of his skin on which the spider nested. He felt the undercurrent of happiness and pleasure from her touch on his arm as a servant wiped off the tiny beads of blood with a handkerchief. Figg adjusted the sensation of Penelope to a more conversational level. He watched Sade for signs of further discomfort and asked, finally, "What are you planning? You might as well tell me."

"My proxies have a lead on a licensed suicide."

"How licensed?"

"Fully. Any death, any where, no conditions."

"Who?"

Sade smiled. "Does it matter? From what I hear, she's exquisite."

"She?"

"Yes." He sighed. "I know you'd prefer a boy but I couldn't find one, not licensed like this one."

Figg was watching Purity again. She was wrapped around a stalk of the sarsa flower, its lower leaves draped lovingly over her dark skin. Purity was eating well herself but still losing weight. She might last as long as another year, maybe, before she died, before the flower drew her completely into its basal leaves in order to finish digesting her. Purity, or whoever she had been, had willed this onto herself, probably for one of the eternal reasons for such a sacrifice, to rescue her family from poverty, because of a fetish, or out of sheer depression and self-destructiveness. The spectacle of public death fascinated Figg. As Sade knew.

The conversation continued as they discussed guests for the party and Figg watched Purity. Penelope dug into Figg's arm and drew blood that his servants wiped away with towels. Figg never bled to excess, only for show. At such moments he recalled that the spider was eating him, too. After a while Penelope grew tired of the game, or lost her appetite, and retreated to her permanent nodes in Figg's scalp. Sade and Figg continued to plan the birthday party. The girl with the license to kill herself would kill or be killed at the end of the party, in front of the guests. Even though public suicide was becoming more common, no one had yet used it as a theme for a private party. When news of this got around, Sade would score a society first for Marmigon, and he knew it and looked very pleased with himself.

The full and complete elaboration of a civilization requires that all its impulses, from darkest to lightest, be expressed in some fashion. But in the case of extreme impulses, such as those Sade enjoyed, the pleasures must necessarily be shared only by a few. This was not an option but rather a requirement. Such was Sade's nature, for instance, that, should many people have become like him, he would have been forced to become like someone else, even more extreme. He could not stand among the commonality. Much like his namesake, Figg thought.

The girl had given her name as Cherry Ann on the legal documents, which Figg obtained for review with his own fleet of barristers. Whatever qualms he had about the kind of party Sade was planning, he was aware of the danger of exposing himself on the legal front. His family agents

traced Cherry's registered identity back to its origin, the child of a third-tier plural marriage, the members of which likely wanted to get rid of her; she had grown up in the Reeks of Béyoton. She was selling her death, not herself; there was no thought of indenture. Her right to die at a time of her own choosing was a long-standing legal principle. Her right to profit from the sale of her death she had established herself, with the help of a barrister firm of which Figg had never heard.

Figg felt apprehensive after his lawyers confirmed that the transaction was entirely in order, as if he feared he should force Sade to call off the party anyway, but in the end he decided to do nothing. Due to the fame of Figg's family and Sade's own notoriety, word of the birthday spread. "Figg Turns Three Hundred, Who Could Tell?" "Sade Fêtes Figg With Cherry Of Death." Headlines in the tabloids, photographs and holographs in all the cheapest and sleaziest panes.

While plans for the party unfolded, Figg ate a number of meals at the Prudent Greenhouse, watching Purity diminish amidst the flash of photo-mites and mini-cams. The news of the suicide birthday party and Figg's attendance at the Prudent Greenhouse focused even more attention on the restaurant, and Purity's slow starvation was a foretaste of Cherry's end. Along with Figg and Sade, other celebrities flocked to eat at the Greenhouse, some of them hoping to score an invitation to the party—stars like Rudy Roloway and Luscious Pixie, superstar cinema actors freshly married for the third time. Figg enjoyed the commotion they caused, rushing into the restaurant amidst the swirl of fly-cams and spy-cams, glee-cams and try-cams.

Figg's birthday was the fifteenth of Ardent, and on a full moon, as it happened. He met Cherry, at his own insistence, near the first of the month, with time to spare to call the whole thing off.

She sat in his dark-sapphire-blue room slumped in a chair with a headset feeding something, probably music, into her skull. Headsets were for people who could not afford or endure a full biological link to the Hormling data mass, commonly called the Surround; this link shaped so much of the life of Senal. She touched the hardware defiantly once she saw him and removed it, her lips set into a hostile sneer. Figg thanked her for coming and offered her a coffee, or a drink, or a narcotic. She asked for a glass of water. He served it to her with his own hand.

"Thank you for coming."

"Skip it." She looked around with a grudging edge of respect. "You have a lot of room here."

"You know who I am?"

She nodded, refusing to look at him. She was wearing a lot of cheap makeup, but she had taken care in applying it. The effect was pleasant but too vivid, especially the impossibly huge eyelashes which were the fashion for both boys and girls at the time. Her clothes were of a pretty good quality, probably new. She had an agent taking care of her until the party, one who had obviously done some work on her appearance.

"I'd like you to be a bit more responsive," Figg said.

She glared at him. "Sure. Fine. You're the guy who's having the party."

"I'm the one having the birthday."

"That's what I said." Now she glared at the floor and shoved her fists into the vest she was wearing, an imitation of a processor vest, bronze and black.

"Do you have any idea why I want to talk to you?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe you're religious."

"Not particularly. I have been, in my time, but at the moment, no."

She shrugged again, her thin brown arms rising and falling.

"I want to know why you want to do this," Figg said.

She was staring at the floor more fixedly now, and her shoulders had set into a stubborn line of tension. "Maybe I'm religious."

"Are you?"

Her two knees came together in a point. Some other expression was trying to break through her sullen veneer. She looked hopelessly young. "Sure. And maybe I want to go in a big way. You know? This is my chance."

"Excuse me?"

She looked him in the eye, something defiant and hard at the center of her gaze. Her soft, high-pitched voice grew steely. "What does it matter to you? I'm legal. I convinced a judge to give me the papers. What does it matter to you anyway, as long as you have your party?"

Up till then Penelope had been quietly sleeping, but now she awakened and rose out of Figg's hair. Cherry shrieked and drew back in her chair, stood up from it and retreated a few steps.

"It's all right," Figg said. "This is my pet."

She was trembling and refused to come closer, watching Penelope creep on delicate legs down Figg's chest. "You let it walk on you."

"Her. She. Penelope is a female spider. She's mostly machine and she's very old. She's my pet and my bodyguard."

"What do you need a bodyguard for? I won't hurt you."

"I always keep Penelope with me. I'm sorry she startled you."

"She won't crawl on me, will she?"

"No. I won't let her." Which was true, as long as Figg kept control of Penelope and Cherry presented no threat. Figg found himself flushed, almost excited, at Cherry's fear. He sat there, breathing deeply. "I'm legally obliged to make sure you're agreeing to do this of your own accord."

"To kill myself, you mean."

"Yes."

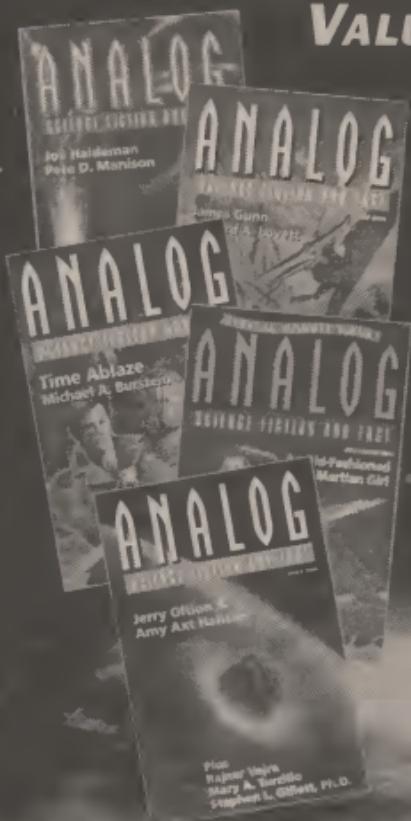
She sat in the chair again. His words apparently angered her a bit, and she rubbed her arms with her hands impatiently. "So. Okay, sure, it's voluntary. I know what I'm doing."

"I'm very serious, Cherry Ann, or whatever your name is. If you don't convince me you sincerely want this, I won't go through with it."

Her jaw took on that stubborn, set look that Figg remembered well from the early years of his own daughters, a very long time ago, a very old memory. But there was a bleakness in Cherry, an emptiness. She said, "I don't actually have to convince you of anything. You're not really the customer, are you?"

"Sade won't have the party if I insist he cancel it." Figg attempted to put this across in a convincing way and hoped the girl had not met Sade. "Tell me why you want to die."

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She sharpened her eyes on Figg and stared. Even he began to feel uncomfortable. Drawing in the short, impatient breath of an adolescent irritated with an elder, she slumped in the chair, resigning herself. "I'm a third child of an illegal. I have negative status, my whole family does. But I have a brother. I can sell my death for my brother and buy him status and he can have a start." She spoke fiercely and intensely.

"So you are religious," Figg said. Now that he knew her story, he was attempting to harden his heart toward her, and largely succeeding. "The way of sacrifice. Brief life. All that."

"I'm not a Quick Flame person."

"You sound like one."

"I feel extra," she said, and Figg heard a true piece of sadness in her voice. Immediately she grew cold again. "I don't want to explain this to you. I already talked to the doctor, and to more doctors, till I'm sick of it. A person has a right to make this choice. It's the law."

Figg studied her a long, still moment. He felt himself staring at the young, moist glow of her skin. "You've signed some papers that entitle Sade to give you a very uncomfortable death."

"Yes. So?"

"Why?"

She flushed, and spoke into her cupped palms. She had drawn her body into a knot in the chair, knees under her chin, arms around her knees. "Like I said, I want to go in a big way."

"So you want this to make you famous."

"You wouldn't understand," she said. "You've been famous all your life."

"Well," Figg said, "not quite."

"You're from a famous family. Your mother was some kind of famous something."

"Yes," he said, as dryly as possible. "Indeed she was. And my father wasn't bad in that department, either."

"Why shouldn't I go out like I'm somebody?" she asked, and Figg was pretty sure she was talking to someone other than him, somebody not present except in her mind. "Why shouldn't I, since I have the chance?"

He raised his arm and let Penelope scamper toward his head. Rising out of the chair, he wished for a drink, and pretty soon a servant brought one, along with more water for the girl. One of the Hildas carrying drinks on a silver tray. The girl gaped like she had never seen a Hilda before, and maybe she hadn't.

Only a day later a card arrived from Sade, with a message requesting Figg to meet him that evening for dinner, something urgent. Sade had borrowed Figg's favorite pre-read-copy of *The 120 Days of Sodom*; the reading was a particularly good one recorded by one of Figg's favorite pre-readers, Olivah Toss, dead for a few millennia but with much of her memory still floating around in the immense Hormling data mass. Toss had read a vast library of texts and had made a fortune on her sensitive pre-readings.

Sade handed back the data set to Figg. "The book has given me some ideas for the party."

He laid out his plan very simply. He wanted to title the whole event "The 120 Hours of Sodom." The party would begin five days before Figg's birthday. Sade wanted to enjoy the party rather than perform in it, but he could easily hire all the sadists and masochists he needed. He would arrange to have Cherry Ann injected with a slow-acting neurotoxin that would be timed to kill her somewhere near the end of the fourth day. She would be on display the whole time, like the sarsa-flower-slave. She would take the poison in public.

Knowing Sade as Figg did, the plan appeared remarkable for its restraint. Figg had expected a much more gruesome end for Cherry, as allowed for in the contract. He found himself relieved to a degree that was surprising; he found himself, in fact, picturing the cherubic expression on Cherry's face at the moment in which he had first seen her, before she knew someone was watching, when she was simply sitting in the chair in his private study waiting for him to enter.

Sade was eating his chilled soup. He looked hardly older than Cherry himself to the untrained eye, a tall, slender man, with nothing like the corpulence of his namesake; but Figg could detect the slight shine of Sade's regenerated skin, the hint of puffiness in the corners of the eyes which even the best tissue regression specialists found hard to avoid after a certain number of treatments. The backs of his hands had a grainy look. What was more important, however, was the expression on his face, which could never have been described as young or fresh. Cherry's face had the moistness of a freshly opened blossom. There she was, in fact, spread out on panes and films over the unused part of the table, Cherry posing in several gowns, suits, and other costumes, so that Sade could choose what she would wear during the event. Some of her more obvious physical defects, including her rather short waist and broad hips, were being correctly surgically, and the pictures reflected the lines of the new Cherry, the one who would soon emerge from her cocoon. Sade touched the pictures with a delicacy that made his desire obvious.

"She looks like Wen."

"Not really," Figg said, although in fact it was true. Especially after the surgery.

"Do you think I'm obsessed?"

"Why would I think that?"

"I changed my name because of Wen," said Sade. "She nearly ruined me."

"This is a different girl," Figg said. He felt Penelope move restlessly on his scalp, and willed her to quiet herself. For once, she obeyed. No need to startle Sade at such a moment.

"I'm too old for these kinds of feelings." His voice was somber and unaffected.

"Now you know how I feel," Figg answered. "After all, I'm the one who's turning three hundred."

But Sade hardly appeared to hear the words at all. He was turning a bit of bread between his fingers, looking at it as if he could see into the cellular structure, and it was possible that he could, of course, with the kind of money he could spend on implants and adaptations. At the moment, he wore the expression of a person who had seen, perhaps, too much.

He had lost his principal wife, Wen, several years ago, and this was the cause of his name-change from Kennick to Sade. Neither Kennick nor Sade were part of his legal name, of course; like most members of the Orminy, Sade kept his true names confidential, though he was known to be a member of House Jurartelate. When known as Kennick, he had been a famously dissolute member of the top levels of Béyoton political society who met Wen during one of his house parties. Their marriage had lasted only a decade. By all accounts he had cared for her in a genuine way, though he had hardly sheltered her. Her suicide and Kennick's subsequent grief had made headlines in many parts of Senal; the image of Kennick as a grieving husband had done considerable damage to his reputation as a decadent socialite, and therefore when he came to his senses he had undergone an identity modification, not his first, in order to rehabilitate himself. He had taken the new name, Sade, and had paid the enormous sum needed to replace his old identity with his new in much of the Hormling data mass, including, whenever possible, in the memories of his friends and acquaintances. The new name-package came with enough references to the original Marquis de Sade that even the ignorant understood the reference, and interested parties could follow the thread to further information on the pre-Transit figure of scandal. Whoever had suggested the name to Kennick/Sade was a mystery; but certainly he had many learned friends. The memory of Kennick had subsequently grown dim, both in the public record and among his friends. This was a function of the fact that Hormling minds were nearly all linked together; a person with sufficient resources could do much to manipulate what others knew or remembered about him.

Sade's comeback remained incomplete, however; by hosting Figg's three hundredth birthday party in such a spectacular fashion, he meant to reclaim his place as one of the influential persons within the constantly shifting politics of Marmigon, which was central to the politics of the Ministries and the rest of the Hormling trade network, even in these modern days when the Mage had established a kind of hegemony over everyone. Figg's family had built Marmigon and maintained controlling interest in its operation even centuries later; by being seen as Figg's intimate friend, Sade meant to re-establish his power base, and even to extend it.

"I can't tell you how many designers and artists I've met with," Sade said. "I'm employing half of Marmigon on this party."

"Did Marisol get you the rooms you wanted?"

"Do you think you wouldn't already have heard if Marisol turned me down?" He was smiling, reaching for his vial of happy powder. He checked the top of Figg's head cautiously. "Where's that spider of yours? It always comes running down your arm when I dose myself."

Penelope was deep in a sleep cycle, and Figg reached up to stroke her back gently. "She won't bother you," Figg said. "She's asleep."

"In a way, it will be a shame to kill her." Sade signaled the waiter to the table.

"My spider?"

"No. Cherry." Sade ordered a brandy and the waiter flitted away. Sade looked at Figg almost mournfully, and Figg wondered what the tabloids

would have made of this picture, the somber Sade contemplating the implications of his plan for virginal Cherry, doomed under contract to die.

"You could always try to save her life," Figg said.

"How can you be such an optimist at your age?" Sade asked, and shook his head. "She's determined to do this. And I'm determined to let her. It's just that regrets are always sweet, you know. A form of pain." He smiled, and Figg felt a chill.

The first day of the party came. Most of the guests had taken rooms in Marmigon, in one of the hotel complexes that it contained, to be nearer the two penthouse floors in which Sade's party was to be held. Figg possessed, of course, his own permanent rooms there, and settled into them for a stay of some days.

On the news panes and filling the flatscreen entertainment programs was information about the party, gossip about who had been invited and who had been snubbed, as well as live footage of the various, and carefully staged, arrivals of guests. For this first day of festivities, Figg had few duties, other than to appear at the party very briefly later in the evening. The least important guests had received first-day invitations, since the first day of the party was practically open to the public. News reports were already gleefully engaged with Sade's careful recreation of various episodes of the Marquis's grisly novel.

The 120 Days of Sodom, in its original French, told of a quartet of libertines who at the beginning of the tale have formed a kind of supper club, devoting their considerable wealth to weekly dinners at which various kinds of sexual perversion were explored. The Marquis, being a devotee of symmetry, described in some detail the differing natures of these four banquets, held in regular sequence, at four different locations in the city of Paris. The Marquis's namesake, Sade of the present, had devoted considerable resources to recreating these banquets through a mixture of live performance, avatar, and holographic projection, and tours of these four installations were held throughout the first day, culminating in a magnificent period feast in the evening at which Figg would appear and at which Cherry would be introduced.

Figg had toured the installations before they opened and found it all too tedious. One room was full of a number of men buggering one another; another was full of prostitutes in various poses of thrill and torment, some of them in the midst of being mutilated and murdered. One room was full of young maidens and the other full of monstrosities and freaks of every kind. Actors portraying the Duc de Blangis, the Bishop of X***, Durcet, and the Président de Cerval, the four redoubtable heroes of the novel, wandered from room to room in various states of undress and excitement. There were ghastly sounds and horrific smells from the rather monstrous practices underway in all the rooms; Sade had spared no expense in his recreation, and Figg was impressed, to a degree. The spectacle was certain to excite a great deal of comment in the media and among the intelligentsia.

Figg dressed carefully in a formal suit and neck-wrap, keeping his processor vest but switching the color to formal black. He had a valet, one

of the Hermans, to help him with dressing; the Herman wrapped Figg's neck-piece for evening wear and adjusted his toe-boots to perfection. His suit was throbbing with energy, pulsing with a deep, deep violet wave, and the Herman adjusted the variance on the randomizer; sometimes the pattern would be regular and sometimes it would not, the best choice for a personal special effect of this type, in Figg's opinion.

He groomed Penelope himself, adjusting her back-fur to a dark maroon, close to black, and brushing it by hand till it looked soft and even. The tips of her legs glowed softly, and a pattern of colors shifted on the surface of her multiple eyes. She burned a lot of energy during her grooming and had to eat one of her captives, a small rodent, trapped in her web in Figg's office. Maybe she was supping from one of the chipmunks he had released into the room a few days ago. The cocoon of web was quivering a bit, so supper was fresh, at least. Figg watched with satisfaction, wondering why this spectacle never bored him. One life was eating another. Life must eat life, always, he thought. The way we will all eat Cherry tonight, or begin to eat her.

He had a meeting with his press person, his attorney's representative, and his agent's assistant, just before he descended from the Marmigon penthouse to the floors of the party. He had been waiting for them in his office with the cloud-windows, looking over a sea of cumulus undulations. Very distant and very far below was a glimpse of an ocean, the Inokit, somewhere in which was the Gate to Irion, the land of the Mage.

"I've brought the last of the broadcast contracts," said Costermonger, his agent.

"Put them in the signature tray and I'll get them stamped," said Figg, gesturing to his desk in the corner of the room, large and sparsely furnished. Costermonger put the secure data-sticks into the signature appenditure of the desk, a considerable walk past an exotic floating garden that drifted through the center of the office. Figg turned to Mistigan the Attorney and Edelyne Harridan the Press Agent and asked, "Any news?"

They looked at one another, Mistigan and Harridan, and Mistigan answered, "The young woman signed the final releases this morning."

"Then everything's legal."

"Yes. Certified by the Seventh Spherical Court of Appeals, all three judges. Now binding. Barring any appeal of the contract, which can't be halted, of course. But this girl is serious. I don't think she'll change her mind."

Figg felt an oddly out-of-place lurch in the stomach at the news, uncharacteristically young of him. The trio of his experts were waiting for his next question. He was about to be briefed on his entrance into the party. He would attend alone, of course, as it was his trademark to be alone, accompanied only by a Hilda and a Herman and by his bodyguard Penelope. Out the windows rolled the sea of atmosphere, purples, blues, steely silvers. No one spoke while he collected his thoughts, and he found the thoughts suspiciously hard to collect in light of the news that Cherry had signed the final papers giving permission for her murder.

All three of Figg's retainers were present in the flesh, and each represented a horde of other experts linked to one another and to their point

person in various ways. At the prices Figg paid, he no longer dealt with avatars or simulacra. There was always a quality difference with the real thing, he found.

Penelope nested on his shoulder, and the Hilda and Herman took up their flank positions, their bodies making those odd, quiet whirring-hissing noises that marked their largely mechanical natures. Mistigan, Hardigan, and Costermonger took up the rear of the elevator; they would remain out of public view but would be available to Figg should he need them during the evening.

His plan was to enter through one of the family passages escorted by another layer of security, six guards plus a scout, so that by the time Figg actually arrived at the party, he had a sizable entourage, and felt quite able to face a crowd. A crowd of living extras had been hired to fill the public space through which he would cross, dressed in a variety of styles, highly fanciful versions of pre-Transit figures, including gladiators, samurai, Tauzt Monks, and rather too many interpretations of seventeenth century France, a mostly mythical nation on a planet presumed to be lost or dead to present-day Hormling. To this mix was added a number of the curious, people who could bully or bribe their way into the event, especially celebrities or would-be celebrities who had been snubbed in the matter of an invitation to the party itself. A hubbub of voices filled the space, lights of changing color positioned on Figg as he walked, flying and land-based cameras, news personalities from various media, a cluster of middlewams belonging to some religious order. He could actually hear the stream of some of it in his head, on his own internal feed, *Here is Figg, Scion of the Most Powerful Motherate of the Orminy, Oldest Son of House Bemonakakenet, Here He is at Three Hundred Years, One of the Very Extremely Richest, Owner of Marmigon, Estate in the Pomone of Tens of Thousands of Acres, Old Bachelor of Eclectic Habits, Here He is Walking to His Birthday Party*, and on and on.

Coverage of the rest of the party, the arrival of Nero Vorteme and the members of the boy band Knee Meme, the incredible security which was prelude to Mima Morgenate, porn heroine of the sex channels, strutting out of her rattle-shaw carriage, flooded his head. He could see it with his eyes and follow the internal channels he was receiving at the same time, though he put the coverage in the background after a while, the media doublespeak having begun to tire him. All was in readiness inside for Figg's own entrance. Sade's face filled the cameras at several points, watching a screen on which Figg's progress through the courtyard was being followed. Figg, watching this image of himself being watched, felt himself and Sade both multiplied in all directions, the media reflecting and reflecting again, stupidly and repetitiously but altogether thoroughly and with every appearance of enthusiasm.

Hardigan the Press Agent had an arrangement with the press for Figg to pass through the myriad reporters without anyone making an attempt to interview him. Other people spoke on camera, but Figg was well known to avoid this. Penelope had gone on alert and her presence, on which all the cameras lovingly lingered, along with the glowering of the security guards, encouraged a sense of decorum in the living reporters.

Marmigon legal AI were engaged in continuous real-time repeat-filing of restraining orders and injunctions to hold the automated cameras and reporting drones in check. Added to these discouragements, the Uppermost House Bemon-a-kakenet was known to be licensed for a certain number of murders in any given year, and Figg had in the past spent some of his share on reporters and photographers who bothered him here in Marmigon, where he was often to be found.

Glimpsing, to the side, the image of a tall, lanky man ripping the nipple off of a prostitute, Figg passed unhurriedly through the exhibits. Nipple degradation was a favorite trope of the original Sade's, along with other kinds of vile death, lavished with uncommon cruelty on whatever women were at hand, though men, and boys in particular, were not altogether spared. The farther installation of male simulations and live performers offered several examples of male-centered tortures, including one young man being strangled at the same time as he was penetrated behind, his dark skin flushed purple, the choke loosened a bit to let him breathe a bit, then tightened more.

The crowd was an older bunch, the sort of people with the time to develop tastes for the tableaux which surrounded them. Some of the spectators were impassive, like Figg, while others were participating via device-links to hook into the psyches of some of the sadists and masochists who were performing. So that, for instance, at the moment of some particularly savage torture of the boy, a wave of response passed through the crowd as all those linked to his mind felt the shudders of pain and pleasure along with him.

Figg's goal was to appear unperturbed by his surroundings and to continue to move more deeply into the rooms, toward a space where a large crowd was being herded with an air of expectancy, down a star carpet for celebrities, which Figg naturally followed along. There, beyond a small cluster of the very famous and a large cluster of the less famous, on a floating platform near a sizeable Eiss sculpture (from her Arch Period) stood a chrysalis meant to contain Cherry. Cherry herself was awaiting her entrance below these rooms, in another suite, preparing to be lifted into the chrysalis and put on display in order for the networks to sell a bit of advertising. At the end of the second or third commercial break following Cherry's appearance, depending on the moment-to-moment ratings, Sade, in front of all these people and the watching world, would poison her.

The dress that contained the poison, keyed to Cherry's DNA and therefore perfectly safe for anyone else to handle, was on display, framed in Eiss's Arch Nineteen. The cloth gleamed and rippled with color. It was a peculiar style of dress popular at the time, a floor-length shimmy with one strap over one shoulder, this one designed by Oscartine and run up in one of the current radiant fabrics. The dress hung like a ripple of water, like a drain of light down a pipe, while cameras of all kinds photographed it. After too long a spell of this, the chrysalis opened and Cherry Ann appeared.

She was wearing nothing at all, her skin a gleaming cocoa color, so soft the light appeared to caress it. Sade was walking toward her. Information about the poison permeated the Surround, along with bits about the design of the dress, and pre-Transit references to women being presented

with various kinds of poison gowns, none of which had anything to do with the historical Marquis de Sade but all of which appealed to the education snobs in the audience. Cherry spoke a poem that No had written for the occasion, three lines in the classic pattern, very beautiful, immediately vanishing from memory. Sade presented her with the dress and she slipped it over her smooth, shining skin.

Not a sound could be heard, as if everyone had drawn a breath at the same moment. Figg felt it in himself, her innocence and something more, her resignation, as she adjusted the hang of the supple, heavy fabric. The image of her movements was repeated around the world and Figg watched them on his inner eye as at the same time his outer was watching the living Cherry, whom Sade was kissing now, Cherry raising her slim hands to his shoulders as if she would like to push him away.

The next morning, Figg watched a special report entitled, "The Silence of Figg," broadcast on several different channels of the Surround, a few of them just slightly out of sync with the rest, so that he saw this broadcast about himself in a sort of rippling, wavering present moment. He had been aware of the documentary for some time and his agents had secretly encouraged its production and placement while his lawyers had attempted to quash it at every stage of its development in order to make it notoriously and widely discussed. Figg's own personal polling services had detected a slight droop in his profile of late, and it was felt he could use this opportunity to bolster his place in the spectrum of the famous and powerful.

The documentary told the story of his childhood, his early careers and successes, his inheritance of title to Marmigon on the passing of Thabian Curtide, Figg's uncle and mentor. Fineas Figg became the new proprietor of the most powerful property on Senal.

Intercut with the narrative about his marriages with various men and women were live updates from the party, where his good friend Sade reigned in splendor over a recreation of the audition of young men and women and boys and girls for retirement to the Chateau Silling, one of the primary episodes of the early pages of *The 120 Days of Sodom*. In the novel, the four heroes retire to a chateau in the remote mountains of France to hold a series of theme-driven orgies with their partners, chosen from the cream of French youth by means legal and illegal. The Sade of the current-day had adapted this narrative to his own purposes.

Figg sent down a proxy sphere to wander through the crowds and take in the sights. Cherry was among the performers, wearing the elegant gown, sipping something from a stemmed glass, looking a bit out of her head. She was playing the part of a stepdaughter sold in a back alley of Paris to one of the procuresses. Over the elegant Oscartine gown was her period costume, with puffed, ruffled sleeves and a long, full skirt, a high waist cut just under the bosom, and a kind of hat called a bonnet over her own now-varicolored hair. She hadn't the least look of someone acting in any kind of spectacle, neither frightened nor reluctant. The camera took her in as often as possible.

Her image was capturing a good percentage of bandwidth that morn-

ing; the Surround was full of snatches of her story, nothing terribly coherent. A couple of newsmixers had sent a crew into the Reeks to explore Cherry's home environment; the Reeks were not so much a single location as a state of certain parts of the Third Tier, people crammed shoulder to shoulder day and night, able to claim only as much space as they could occupy, lucky ones, like Cherry's family, part of a large enough group to hold onto a space inside some walls, where there was a bit of security. Figg watched scenes allegedly taped in a market in the Reeks, the frame so crowded with bodies that it was impossible to make much of the merchandise, glimpsed now and then behind a tapestry of sallow faces. In many parts of the Third Tier, there was never much of sunlight, either real or transferred, and the whole panorama of the news item had a macabre quality, a scene as perverse, desperate, and flesh-filled in its way as the scenes from Sade's party.

Scenes of squalor in the Reeks were sometimes projected over images of Cherry, the ghost images weaving in and out of each other, Cherry so graceful, so small and slight, emerging naked from her chrysalis and donning the shimmering gown. Cherry moving among party guests, her bodyguards keeping them all away from her, and many of them hanging back without any encouragement to do so, as if reluctant to come too close to the poisonous fabric of her shimmy. These were the first images from the party that moved Figg in any erotic way. The clench of her small, round buttocks under the fabric of the dress excited him.

He was due to attend the party later in the evening. In the meantime he had a regression session, not very satisfying, to bring back some luster to his three-hundred-year-old skin. His actual birthday came in two days, the day Cherry was to die. He wanted to look his best.

After the party that evening, he had a singular dream. His body was randomized to dose itself with a mild hallucinogen during sleep, calculated to give his dreams a rich, vivid, altered-consciousness quality; he preferred not to know when these dreams would visit him, in order to keep from falling back into habitual use of these same hallucinogens, a problem that had plagued him off and on for the last century or so. The dream concerned the Reeks, impersonal images of the crowding, the way it would feel to walk in the crowd, the press of bodies from all sides, the smell of the unwashed, the dank breath, the dirty look of the hair, the pallor of the lighter skin tones, the sallow quality of the browns. Moments later in the dream Figg wondered what it would be like to run into Cherry there, and shortly after he did, of course, and he and she were walking hand in hand. The chemical made this part of the dream richly colored, the feeling of her warm hand pressed against his own very vivid, even to the slight moisture of her palm. She turned and smiled at him every so often, the same smile each time, and then closed her eyes and turned her face away.

The low ceilings, the narrow corridors full of people, the shops with their armed guards, the markets like armed camps, all oppressed Figg greatly, and not only that but actually pressed against him, or seemed to, from all sides. He felt confined as never before in his life. Was this what it was like in the deepest sections of the Reeks?

Suddenly Cherry vanished and a new face pressed closer, a gaunt, sexless middlewam with a bony pelvis and foul breath, a set of greasy urchins against his legs, other faces swimming in all directions but refusing to resolve themselves into wholes, and a smell of rot that was overwhelming. Hands reached into his clothing. Chilly skin touched his own and he shivered and awoke, the flush of the hallucinogen adjusting itself, subsiding a bit, sensing the sudden change in his consciousness. He looked around his sleeping room at the play of shadows from the narrow windows. Light from the moon bathed him in the bed as his breathing quieted. Penelope stepped off his head to preen herself on the pillow, mindless of him.

To anchor the third day of the party, Sade had incorporated some of the most horrific moments from Olivah Toss's own reading of the Marquis's novel, including the rape of the kitchen maids, their subsequent torture and destruction. The masques, as he called them, took place in a different part of Marmigon, the Transcendent Morningstar Promenade, which had been transformed into a maze-like representation of a pre-Transit chateau, a huge house made of stone with thick walls, gloomily lit by lamps and candles, decorated with couches, settees, cushions, carpets, and torture devices. A parade of celebrities, politicians, and Orminy anchored the media coverage. Sade had even invited a few select schools at all age levels to send groups for an educational tour of the elaborate living exhibitions. Various guest hosts, interviews, autographings, and auctions, kept the party guests entertained. The overnight reports on the saturation of media coverage of the party had obviously pleased Sade, who sent Figg a mentext message of congratulations, as if Figg, too, had a personal stake in this triumph.

Cherry was on display through the day, sometimes walking through the party with her bodyguards, other times inhabiting a high platform that raised her above the common crowd. She moved serenely in the Oscartine gown, now and then reclining on a couch or studying a handheld. The platform was secured by its own set of well-dressed security people and no one was allowed to go to the top except Cherry and her guests. So far she had invited no guests.

Figg found himself repulsed by the orgies rather than feeling any vestige of his old attraction to this sort of pleasure. Even an adjustment of his blood chemistry to a state of pre-arousal failed to stimulate his interest. At one time, he would have been at the center of the crowd, watching avidly as Durcet and the Bishop each administered two hundred lashes to the poor, nameless maid, her backside streaming blood and raw with flayed skin. He would have been fascinated at the amputation of several of the boy Giton's fingers during another episode in another part of the faux chateau. Arriving at the party for his scheduled appearance, he found the whole scenario to be more tedious than titillating.

Instead of the orgies, he attended Cherry. As she drifted from place to place on top of her private temple, she appeared as comfortable and easy with herself as if she had been perfectly alone. A crowd ringed the platform, watching her every move.

Sade said, "I hope you're enjoying yourself," in a low tone.

Figg nodded his head slightly.

Sade leaned close to Figg. "I can't get that girl to come off the platform. She should be down here where the guests can see her." The lean-in and the low tone were for photo-effect, for the cameras, their conversation screened by their two privacy fields.

"I think she looks quite mysterious." The Hilda had fetched Figg a drink and handed it to him; he sipped the cool, biting liquor and went on. "People appear to be paying a good deal of attention to her up there."

"Yes, but it's splitting the focus."

Figg shrugged. "I suppose your party's not much to her taste."

A genuine look of vexation took over Sade's features and he spoke with some exasperation. "I don't care what's to her taste. She's supposed to be down here, dying, in public."

Above them and at some distance, she was fondling a piece of sculpture which obviously gave her a low-grade pleasure stimulation, judging from the way she moved her hands over it, and the way she moved the sculpture, a twist of smooth stone, against her torso. A large cluster of cameras was filming her from a distance; her status as a legal suicide actually gave her a larger zone of protection than even Figg's attorney system could manage. "I could go and talk to her," Figg said.

"If she'll let you up. Those are her guards, over there. She's only spoken to one or two reporters during the whole party and I'm sure they paid for the privilege."

"She's turned out to be a very clever young woman."

"Yes, she has," said Sade, and his eyes sharpened on Figg at that moment. "Do you think she's going to bolt?"

Looking at the slim figure moving in the shimmering light, a kind of dreaminess to her presence, Figg shook his head. He found himself sad at the thought, and irritated by the sadness. "No. I don't think she will. As long as we don't try to force her to do anything she doesn't want to do."

"Where's the fun in that?" Sade asked.

Figg and his entourage wasted no time in crossing to the platform, and Figg presented his compliments to Cherry, who, to the surprise of nearly everyone, sent word for him to climb to the top for a chat with her.

She was aware of her status in this moment of the party, clearly. Standing at the center of the platform, she was smoking a thin, long cylinder as Figg approached. She offered the butt of whatever it was to Figg, and he shook his head. "I'm already using," Figg said, "I don't want to mix."

She shrugged, and blinked at him. "Did the freak send you up here?"

"The freak?"

"The party boss. The one with the sick imagination."

"You don't like Sade's party?"

"What kind of party is full of weird stuff like this?" Cherry asked, making it plain she meant the tableaux, which appeared small and insignificant from this vantage, to a greater degree than the height of the platform could explain. "Is that really what you people like to do with all your money?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you like that stuff?"

Figg reflected, stood there just long enough to consider decently, and said, "No, not really. I used to. But I've changed, it appears."

"You used to?"

"Yes."

"Ripping off women's nipples and amputation and torture and all that?"

Figg felt vaguely uncomfortable. "Most of that's being faked, of course. But yes, I used to enjoy it. Some of it."

Figg found himself watching her in a familiar way, with a softening of his feelings toward her, and a kind of nimbus of light around her presence. An old and unwelcome feeling threatened to unloose itself.

"I know exactly what you came up here to do," she said, smiling. "You want me to come down there."

"That's what Sade wants. He wants me to convince you to come down."

"Do you really think I should?"

"Possibly. He could make things difficult, you know."

"I'll be dead tomorrow. How much more difficult can it get?"

He gave her a wry smile. "He could dispute your contract after you're not here to defend yourself."

"He'll have to fight my attorneys. I'm in compliance."

"Why doesn't Sade agree?"

She shrugged, not at all hostile. "I don't know. I'm at the party. You see? That's all I ever agreed to do. That and dying are my only commitments. And I assume this dress is doing its work."

She spoke with such conviction it was impossible to contradict her. Figg checked himself, moving very carefully in her vicinity. The old, unwelcome feeling had failed to crystallize so far, but neither had it vanished. He continued to look at her with careful neutrality, testing himself at each moment. He said, "All right, then. I don't really care whether you wander around down there one way or the other. The whole thing is much more mysterious if you stay up here, aloof."

"That's what my agent says."

The mention of her agent brought just the right squalid note to the moment, and Figg took a deep breath. "Well, I won't keep you. Could I ask you one question? You said you're doing this for your brother?"

"He gets the money. I spent some of it, but he gets the biggest part."

"Is he still in the Reeks?"

The question stilled her, and she studied Figg with care. "Why do you want to know?"

"It's possible I might want to help him." Figg spoke cautiously. He had known what he would say only an instant before he spoke.

"Help?"

"Beyond the money you leave him. It's possible that I may be of some service."

"Why?"

Figg shrugged, uncomfortable. "I'm a very old man. It's simply a whim."

She waited a moment, as if gauging the truth of what he said, rolling the words around in some sifter in her head. "His name is Keely," she said. "My attorney knows where he is. He lives with my older sister's group right now. But they don't have room for him to stay."

"Your parents?"

"In public wards. They couldn't maintain group housing."

The spectacle of her face in a truly vulnerable expression astonished him, and he felt a pang of caring for her that he quickly attempted to isolate and suppress. With the help of his emotional enhancements he was able to do so, but for a moment, he felt a deep bond of affection for Cherry, or for whoever she really was.

"I'll see what I can do," Figg said, and turned away, unsettled.

He thought no more about the party or Cherry's brother but only about Cherry herself. Returning to his private rooms, leaving the party sooner than expected, though it did not matter, with so many other celebrities in attendance. He stood at the window, looking at the distant ocean.

The next day he went down to the party finale dressed in simple evening clothes, accompanied by the Hilda, the Herman, Penelope, and his bodyguards.

The size of the crowd astonished him, luminary after luminary crowded into the Azure Peacock Stillness Room, the penthouse ballroom usually reserved for private functions of House Bemonakakenet. Here was Carmela Carvaughn waving her white handkerchief to her fans, there was President Mbumbo of AnRanCity and his wife the First Lady of Good Harbors hanging on his arm. Yonder was Chang, famous Béyoton Bombers tight-end of stipple-ball accompanied by yet another beautiful boyfriend. Above them all beyond the transparent ceiling, astonishing and stark, opened a sky darkening to violet, clusters of stars twinkling beyond rags of cloud.

Cherry walked among the crowd in a globe of light that moved with her, a couple of bodyguards at her side. Wherever she moved, the crowd parted for her as if in the presence of an Orminy matron. She was speaking to people with an air of physical ease, playing the part of hostess with everyone here a guest. At first she moved too far away for Figg to see her face, but he passed near enough, on the way to his own station, to catch the drawn, tired air of her, eyes bleary as if she had not slept.

She had been doing this duty for a while, the Surround full of her image, moving among the party guests in the dramatic last moments of her life. For tonight she was the only star of the party and the theme of the Marquis de Sade and Chateau Silling were forgotten. She drifted among the most beautiful people in the world.

Quiet music was playing, waiters ambling through the crowd, tables of food and drink scattered through the ballroom. Along the far wall of glass overlooking the ocean paced Sade himself, on the broad dais where the most intimate birthday guests had gathered, awaiting Figg's arrival.

Overhead, at the center of the room, a clock was counting down. Only a few more minutes were left. The arrival of Figg heralded the beginning of the end, as Sade had planned. When Figg took his seat on the dais, eldest of the eldest Orminy house, Sade came to stand beside him, and Cherry, undulating through the crowd in her glowing shimmy, headed gradually toward him at the same time.

Her step became uncertain as she approached, and she paused to move

strands of hair carefully out of her eyes. She was weakening visibly as the clock wound down toward zero. Sade smiled in satisfaction. She looked at Figg as she approached, her young face fresh, gleaming, her skin so moist and soft he longed to stroke her cheek with his thumb. Sweating lightly, as if fevered, for a moment she had a tentative look, as if she might be changing her mind, as if she might turn to one of her attendants and signal that she wanted to appeal the contract she had signed. She still had time. But up the steps to the dais she climbed and as she rose higher, looking over the crowd of stars and luminaries who had come to watch her die, she grew more and more serene.

She turned to Figg and said, "Happy birthday," as the last seconds of her life flowed away and she sank to her knees.

Sade walked slowly toward Cherry as she panted, struggling to breathe. He was holding something in his hand, a control of some kind. Guests pressed toward them on the dais, but everyone left a space around Figg, Sade, and Cherry. "Before we say good-bye, I have a surprise for you," Sade said to her, glancing at Figg a few meters away.

"I'm not sure I want anything more from you," Cherry answered, supporting herself on hands and knees, looking up at him with effort.

Cameras had been warned by someone and were picking up the scene.

"Aren't you curious about my surprise?" Sade asked.

"Why should I be?"

"Well, for one thing, because I'm paying you a great deal of money."

She gave him a scornful look. "And I'm about to give you what you want."

"There's someone who wants to share your last moments with you," Sade said, and gave her a smile that chilled the air. He touched the control in his hand. "I brought him here to see you."

A small boy appeared beside him, concealed in a privacy cloak until Sade turned it off. He was slim to the point of gauntness with large round eyes and jug-sized ears, a homely child, and from Cherry's startled, tender reaction, it was obvious he was Keely, her brother.

She turned on Figg a look of purest hate that froze him and numbed him. The next second, she knelt in front of her brother. She had eyes only for him. She tried to say something, and the thin boy gripped her tight, face stricken with fear. Her face went ashen, suddenly, and the life drained out of her so gradually Figg could not have said exactly at what moment she died. But she was facing her brother until at last only he was holding her up. This was the image that swept around the world in a heartbeat, the brother lost, holding his dead sister, Sade standing over them both.

The look of hate Cherry had given, the clear suspicion that Figg had betrayed her, made Figg go cold. He glared at Sade, who was smiling, with not the least inkling of what he had set in motion.

The deed was done in a moment. Mistigan was on duty for any problem that might arise with the party finale. Figg registered his intentions with the proper authorities in a trice, targeted Penelope, and moved forward to take the boy, Keely, into his arms in one smooth gesture. Sade made some sound of protest and then one of terror, as Penelope appeared and hurried toward him.

The child hardly resisted, so light that Figg could carry him easily. He

moved down the dais, away from Cherry's body as, behind them, Penelope circled Sade with web, climbed partway up his legs to bite him, paralyzed him to stop his cries, and killed him in front of all those present at his party, driving those needlepoint legs into his soft, pale flesh.

The Herman and the Hilda stayed behind to guard Cherry. Figg's bodyguard swept him and Keely through the stunned crowd. The news went out that the eldest of Bemonakakenet had killed his old friend Sade. This would be the stuff of opera, one member of the Orminy killing another, like old times. The guests, expecting only a suicide, received the murder of their host as an added bonus. Senal's most powerful Orminy family had once again exercised its hereditary right to legal murder; the headlines were already beginning to jangle against each other in the Surround. Liberals would wring their hands but the Ministries, being themselves controlled by the Orminy, would do nothing.

Penelope caught up with them before they reached the private elevator, slipped quietly up Figg's sleeve and nestled into his scalp without any fuss.

As the elevator doors slid efficiently closed and the elevator began to carry them to the penthouse, Figg saw Cherry's face again, the purity of her hate when she had assumed he had betrayed her, and then her despair as life ebbed away. He shivered and looked down at the child, still sobbing, but attempting to stifle himself against Figg's trousers, shivering with terror and trying to be silent at the same time.

A moment of heartache filled Figg, unfamiliar after so long and yet so full, the kind of emotion he had despaired he might never feel again. He knelt gently and Keely, startled, made a sound of fear. "It's all right," Figg said at once, in a hush, as the boy, big-eyed, looked at him. "I promise, it's all right. It will be all right." He repeated the words, as if for himself.

"I want my sister," the boy said, in a hollow wail that filled the elevator car, a sound so big it shook even the bodyguards.

Figg's voice steadied. "Your sister is dead. I'm sorry."

Keely, face collapsing into hurt, nodded that he understood. He was almost frowning and his face, trembling, was like Cherry's. He collapsed against Figg, and it was too late, then, to do anything to stop the feelings that flooded him, again, after such a long time. He took Keely home, fed him, sat with him, put him to bed. Figg could feel, as he did, that his life would have to open again, like a flower in bloom. As the night faded and morning light flooded the windows of the room where the child was sleeping, Figg realized what he was feeling was a change in himself, welcome because it meant he was still, truly, alive.

Sade's picture, taken at the moment of his death, filled every corner of the Surround for days. In the best of the images, Penelope had hamstrung him with web and was climbing up the side of his neck, sinking her legs into him as she climbed. Streams of blood flowed from the thin shafts. Sade raised both hands as if in supplication, his face flooded with ecstasy, and he gazed beyond the camera as if at something waiting. He was, as he had wished to be, at the center of the media world for a time, but was soon superceded when the news went out that Purity, the sarsa-flower slave at the Prudent Greenhouse, had finally wasted away to nothing and died. Her master, the flower, afterward perished of grief. O

OMNIVORES

The physicists want
a Theory of Everything.
They sit in their
cafeteria dining halls
scribbling the secrets
of the universe on
napkins while brushing
away bread crumbs
and angling their
pens so that their
equations don't run
into the mustard stain.
One of them pulls
a fresh napkin from
a dispenser. This one's
cleaner, he says.
Another physicist
hesitates, then takes
it and explains her
Theory of Everything.
All the physicists
watch her but they
are thinking about that
last slice of apple pie
waiting on the counter
under the glass for
one of them to say it's
mine it's all mine.

—Mario Milosevic

William Sanders began writing professionally over thirty years ago, though it was only in the nineties that he took up the short story. A regular contributor to *Asimov's*, he has also appeared in other magazines and anthologies, and has twice won the Sidewise Award for Alternate History. Mr. Sanders's latest story collection—*Is It Now Yet?*—is published by Wildside Press. Terror in the skies takes on a chilling new meaning in Mr. Sanders's frightening look at . . .

ANGEL KILLS

William Sanders

I was there when Carmody got his twenty-second angel. I'd been there when he got some of the others, but I hadn't actually seen it happen, having been pretty busy myself at the time.

This time, though, I had the best seat in the house: I was flying Carmody's wing. That was pretty unusual, since as squadron exec I led my own flight; but there was a virus going around and we were running shorthanded, and then at the last minute Robinson's wife went into labor and I took his place so he could go to the hospital.

The angels showed up late in the patrol, going after a United 757 that was coming in to the south runway, and we intercepted and scattered them with no damage to either side. I didn't even get in a shot, being occupied covering Carmody. Orozco, coming up behind, said later that she'd taken a couple of shots and missed. That was all of us; as I say, we were shorthanded.

This bunch of angels weren't very aggressive; they started disappearing almost as soon as we showed up. The 757 touched down unharmed, except for tires smoking from a too-fast landing. So much for that, I thought, checking the clock and the fuel level as we swung out over the big freeway interchange and started a tight circle back toward Sky Harbor. We tried to avoid flying over downtown Phoenix if we could help it; the chainsaw racket of tuned-up Lycomings made the citizens nervous.

Then Carmody's voice came through the headphones: "Huey, two o'clock low!"

I looked but I didn't see anything. Balls, I would have said if it had been anybody else, but everybody knew about Carmody's freakish eyesight. I craned my neck to stare down past the cockpit coaming, and sure enough, there the bastard was, down low, flying east above Buckeye Road. What

it was doing, why it hadn't vanished with the others, there was no point in trying to guess; trying to figure angels is a good way to go crazy.

Carmody was already rolling into a steeply descending pursuit curve, the little biplane dropping like a stooping falcon toward the flitting white shape below. I followed him down, looking around quickly in case it was a trap—not that anybody's ever heard of angels trying anything that tricky, but you never know—and a moment later I heard him call, "Alpha Two, clear me."

"Alpha One," I said, "you are clear."

The actual kill was no big deal. The angel was still flying straight and level—maybe there was something wrong with it, whatever that would mean in angel terms—and Carmody simply dropped down astern and fired. From my position I couldn't see the flash of Carmody's gun, but a red spot appeared on the angel's back, right between the wings, and then almost instantly there was a great big yellowish flash and the angel was gone.

Carmody was yelling at me again. "Alpha Two, can you confirm?"

"Affirmative," I said. You had to observe all the formalities with Carmody or he'd get his jock in a knot. "Destruction confirmed," I added for the record. They didn't like us to say "kill" on the radio; it upset some people.

There was a sudden scream in the earphones. "Control to Alpha One," a woman's voice said, sounding very excited. "Congratulations! You did it!"

That was when I realized what had just happened. I'd forgotten about Carmody's record. As of now, he was the top scorer in the United States and maybe the world. The Russians were claiming one of their guys had knocked down sixty or so, but if you believed that you'd believe anything.

Carmody's port wings lifted as he started to turn back toward home, while sounds of cheering came through the earphones; and I followed, thinking: well, now the bullshit starts to get deep.

It was two days later that Lewis showed up. Carmody was off to Washington to get his hand shaken by the president, leaving me in charge, so I got to meet the new man first.

He strode briskly into the office and came to attention in front of my desk. I let him stand there for a few seconds while I looked him up and down. Healthy-looking lad, solid shoulders under his crisp uniform blouse, wiry no-ass build. On the short side, but then if he hadn't been he wouldn't have gotten hired; a Pitts cockpit just isn't roomy enough for the big boys. You could have called him handsome, I suppose, if you liked that strong-jawed, clean-cut look. Kind of a three-quarter-size Li'l Abner.

I said, "Sit down, for God's sake."

"Yes, sir." He went over and sat in the nearest chair. I swear he managed to sit at attention.

I started to tell him to knock it off, but then I realized I wouldn't be doing him a favor. Carmody would love him, just as he was. We weren't really a military organization—technically we were a branch of the Transportation Security Administration, just like the guy who puts your baggage through the scanning machine—but Carmody thought we ought to be, and he could get very tiresome if you didn't go along with his little Dawn Patrol fantasy.

I said, "I've looked at your records. You did pretty well in training." In

fact he'd been close to the top of his class; his scores were sure as hell better than mine had been. "So," I said, "I'm sure you can answer a simple question for me."

I reached into the top drawer and took out a mounted photo and held it up. "What is this?"

He glanced at the picture. "Sir," he said, "that is a Hostile Unidentified Entity. Popularly known as an angel."

"Uh huh." I laid the picture on the desk, face up. "Officially we're supposed to call them HUEs, because 'angel' offends the religious whackos who form such an important part of our revered president's base of support. And for official purposes we go along with it, and on the radio we call them Hueys because somebody might be listening. Unofficially, though, among ourselves, we call them angels, same as everybody else." Even our heroic leader, Lord Carmody Ye Penis-Headed.

"Yes, sir," Lewis said.

I wanted badly to tell him to quit calling me "sir," but I knew if I did he'd say, "Yes, sir," and then I'd have to kill him and that would look like hell on our efficiency report. I sighed and tapped the picture with my fingertips.

"Wrong answer, in any case," I told him. "You told me what this is called. I asked you what it is. And the correct answer is: nobody knows."

"Uh, yes sir. I mean, no sir." His smooth-shaven cheeks went faintly pink. "That is—"

"Nobody knows what they are," I said. "Nobody knows if they're alive, or some sort of non-living devices, or something else that we don't have any words for. Nobody knows if they're intelligent, or just programmed, or being directed from wherever they come from, not that anybody knows where that is either. Or even if where they come from is a 'where' in the sense of a location in our universe."

It was obvious he wanted to speak, but I raised a hand. "No, Lewis, just listen, all right? I'm aware they went over all this at the training school. And you took notes and learned the answers for the tests but deep down, like everybody else, you wondered if they were telling you the whole truth. Didn't you? Didn't you sort of figure that when you finally got out and joined an operational squadron, you'd find out the *real* story?"

I stood up and walked around the desk. "Well, I hate to disappoint you, but what they told you is pretty much the straight word. There aren't any secrets. At least none that anybody in the field knows. Maybe the government's got something more, but if they do they're not sharing it with us."

I hung my ass on the edge of the desk and looked down at him. "We still don't know what the angels are. They don't show up on radar, and they don't leave any heat signature except when they're using those cutting torches or energy-beam weapons or whatever the hell they are. Nobody's ever had a chance to study one, because they explode and vanish without a trace when you kill them. Try to capture them and they simply disappear, and you're lucky if they don't kill you first. A lot of good men died, Lewis, finding out how much we don't know. Made the supreme sacrifice to expand the boundaries of our ignorance."

I paused, but he didn't say anything, not even another yes-sir. He actually appeared to be thinking. Amazing.

"We think we know a few things about them," I said. "We think we know they never go after anything on the ground, but all we really know is that they haven't done it so far. We think we know a little about their performance envelope, but it's all just extrapolation from observation. There's no scientific basis, because by any of the known rules of aerodynamic science they can't fly at all. Those white wings don't have enough area even for gliding flight, let alone the kind of hairy-ass maneuvering these bastards do."

In fact there's a very persuasive theory that the "wings" aren't for flying at all; that they serve some other purpose that we can't even guess at. But no doubt Lewis knew about that, too.

"But then," I added, "by any scientific rules, they can't exist. And nobody knows for sure if they do, as we understand physical existence."

I picked up the picture again and looked at it. It was a typical gun camera shot, grainy and fuzzy, but you could still see all the main details. An angel looks anything but angelic when you see its face up close. If you can call that a face; if that's even what it is. That nasty-looking V-shaped slit that looks like a mouth could just as well be its equivalent of an asshole.

"It's been a little over two years since they showed up, Lewis, and the state of our knowledge can be summed up in the words: jack shit. All we know for sure is that they like to cut airplanes open in midair and do horrible things to the people inside. And we don't even know why they do that—food, tissue specimens, hell, sacrifices, they could have a religion for all we can say—and it's possible we never will."

I tossed the picture onto the desk. "The other thing we know is that it's our job to stop them from doing it. Which gets us back to you and the reason you're here, so let's get you processed in and then we'll go see what you can do with a Pitts."

Lewis was already suited up and waiting for me outside the ready room door, helmet tucked under his arm, when I came out of the office a couple of hours later. He didn't quite come to attention when he saw me, but he pulled himself up even straighter as he said, "Ready, sir?"

"Right with you." I went into the ready room and got my helmet out of my locker—screw the coveralls, it was too damn hot and Carmody wasn't around to give me shit about regulations—and went back outside. Lewis was still standing there, gazing up at the sky to the west, where not much was happening. A 737 was climbing steeply over downtown Phoenix, too high now to identify the airline. Lower and closer, you could just make out the little shiny dots that had been its escort, wheeling back toward the airport, their job done now that it had enough speed and altitude to be safe. The buzz of their engines sounded toylike at this distance.

Lewis said, "Seems awfully quiet, sir."

Without looking at him I said, "Where are you from, Lewis?"

"Rawlins, Wyoming. That's in the western part—"

"I know where it is. Been very many angel attacks there?"

"No, sir. We're over six thousand feet."

And the angels can't, or at least don't, operate higher than about a mile. Which is why they show up around airports—since they can only get at

the planes during takeoff or landing—and also why Denver finds itself a major international airline hub.

I said, "And you thought things would be livelier at a place like this, did you? Fighting off hordes of angels, day after day?"

"Well, not exactly—"

"Oh, I don't blame you. The way the news media go on, you could easily get the impression it's a regular combat zone over any major airport."

I nodded in the direction he'd been looking. "In fact, though, this is pretty typical. We'll go for two or three weeks, occasionally a month or more, without seeing an angel. Then all of a sudden there they are, and things get intense for a little while, and then they're gone and it's back to routine patrolling again."

He stood for a moment digesting this. "Yes, sir," he said finally. "I suppose I didn't realize . . . I mean, you hear about a new angel attack almost every day or two."

"Sure. *Somewhere* in the world, they materialize and try for a plane. But you'll find that usually that was the only attack reported that day, anywhere. Now and then there'll be two in a twenty-four-hour period, on a few rare occasions three or four, but I've never heard of more. And almost never twice in a row at the same location."

I turned to face him. "I hope you really like to fly around in circles, Lewis, because that's what you're going to be doing for most of your time here. Come on."

We walked over to the hangar area. The heat was coming up off the concrete apron with brutal force; it was like walking across the top of a stove.

The two planes were sitting at the front of the hangar with their noses sticking out like a couple of inquisitive puppies. They looked slightly comical, despite their black-and-white government-cop paint jobs: dinky little open-cockpit biplanes with spatted wheels, like something from the nineteen-thirties. They certainly didn't look like professional killers.

But then they'd never been designed for that; they'd always been strictly for sport, for competition aerobatics and air-show exhibitions. If you'd told Curtis Pitts, back in the forties, that his basic design would one day prove to be the perfect weapon in a specialized war, he'd have laughed in your face.

It's true, all the same. Only a little gymnast like the Pitts can mix it up with the darting, jinking, flitting angels. The military tried with their big proud jets, and lost too damn many of them before they finally admitted defeat and left the job to us.

Larabee came out the side door of the hangar. "Everything ready?" I said, and Larabee nodded.

"Didn't want to roll them out till you got here. Leave them sitting out in that sun even a few minutes, you'd get a blistered ass when you climbed in." Larabee grinned. "This the new man?"

"This is Lewis," I told her, and she gave him an up-and-down once-over and then looked at me and raised one eyebrow, just a little bit, still grinning. I stifled a laugh and made a follow-me gesture to Lewis and we walked on into the hangar.

I gave my plane a quick walk-around and then hoisted myself into the tiny cockpit—you don't so much climb aboard a Pitts as pull it on like a

pair of pants—and sat for a moment, enjoying the slightly cooler air inside the hangar, before starting the primary check routine. I flipped the battery switch and watched the instruments come alive. Nothing seemed to be waving its arms at me. I glanced up at the light gun on its mount above the upper wing. The little red LED was on, showing the auxiliary battery fully charged; even though this wasn't a combat flight, we were supposed to be ready for action any time we left the ground.

The gun was the one wrong-looking thing about the Pitts, and even then it didn't look like a weapon. After all, it was just a glorified flashlight, totally harmless to humans or any other living thing except an angel.

Which is yet another of those questions without answers. Why should a beam of highly focused light, at a certain notch on the red spectrum—basically a modified laser—have such instant and terminal effects on any angel it hits? Nobody even has a credible theory on that one. They only discovered it by accident, while trying to develop a new aiming system; and thank God, if there is one, that they did, because so far it's the *only* way anybody's found to kill the bastards. An angel can take any number of direct hits from cannon shells or rockets without even seeming to notice, but nail him with the light gun and he's gone.

And there are other advantages, like being able to shoot them off a plane under attack without harming the aircraft or the people inside. In fact the light gun represents one of the few positive developments in the war against our angelic visitors.

I looked over at Lewis. He gave me a thumbs-up signal. I switched off and jacked myself up out of the tiny cockpit and said, "Okay, Larabee, let's roll them out."

We climbed to six thousand and I led the way northward, past the ragged brown bulk of Piestewa Peak and the shiny sprawl of the wildly misnamed Paradise Valley. Somewhere down there, I remembered, there used to be a field for ultralight aircraft and gliders. Christ, had it only been a couple of years ago that people thought nothing of flying around at low altitudes, moving slower than a good motorcycle, with nothing worse to worry about than engine failures and bad weather? Even ordinary private flying was just a memory over large areas of the country, except for the few privileged bastards who could afford something like a Learjet. Last I heard, Cessna was laying off half their work force.

Finally we were over more or less empty desert. I thumbed the mike switch and said, "Okay, Lewis. Try and stay with me."

I opened the throttle and eased the nose down into a shallow dive, building a bit of speed, and then suddenly I yanked the Pitts up into a vertical climb, watching between my feet as the horizon came into view through the clear panel in the cockpit floor. I gave her a little rudder, keeping her perpendicular, while the airspeed needle swung rapidly counterclockwise. Just as the Pitts ran out of speed I kicked hard right rudder.

The world beyond the cockpit went momentarily crazy as the Pitts flipped sidewise into a stall turn and pinwheeled down the sky, the Lycoming screaming like an axe murderer. When the nose was pointing straight down I steadied her and then threw the stick over. Maricopa

County rotated through 360 degrees as it rushed up toward me. I hauled back on the stick and pulled her out of the dive, somewhat lower than the authorities would have approved of, and kept going up into a loop. At the top of the loop I changed my mind, rolled upright, said why not and continued through a triple snap roll, and then leveled out and looked around for Lewis.

I couldn't see him anywhere. I started to get on the radio, to ask where he was, but then I had a horrible thought. I checked the mirror.

There he was, snuggling up behind me like a mad proctologist. I said, "Jesus!" involuntarily, and then, still with the mike off: "All right, pretty boy, let's dance."

I spent the next hour leading Lewis around the sky, trying to lose him. It was a very long hour.

I took him through Cuban eights and hammerhead stalls and outside snap rolls, boomerang turns and inverted loops and negative flick rolls, damn near everything in the book and a few things that aren't. An observer on the ground might have concluded that the pilot was having some sort of seizure. The only thing I left out was tailslides; the way Lewis kept coming up behind me, I was afraid I'd fall right into him.

And I couldn't shake him. Every time I paused and looked around, there he was. He had sense enough to back off and give me room when a maneuver called for it, but then there he'd come again. At the end, after a particularly violent series, I checked the mirror and he was following me inverted.

I sighed and flicked on the mike. "Right," I said. "Point made and taken. Let's go home."

Later that afternoon I locked the office and headed for the parking lot, pausing to watch the six o'clock patrol take off. Tsosie's Delta flight, back up to strength now; the virus seemed to have run its course. The blare of their engines rattled off the hangar fronts as they lifted off.

The demonstrators were waiting outside the gate beyond the security booth. Having our own parking lot and our own gate is one of the minor perks of the job, but then the religious gazooies found out about it and they'd been picketing ever since. They yelled incomprehensibly as I drove past, and a couple of them waved signs: SLAY NOT GODS ANOINTED. WOE UNTO THEM THAT RESIST THE LORD'S JUDGEMENTS. An old lady wore a sandwich-board placard that warned bluntly HELL AWAITS YOU.

At least they'd quit trying to block the gate, after several confrontations with the law. They weren't giving up, though. According to them the angels were just that: heavenly spirits sent by God to punish humanity for being wicked. For us to try and stop them was blasphemous; to kill them was a sin even worse than oral sex.

Not that all the religious knuckle-walkers felt this way. On the contrary, the majority held to a counter-theory that the angels were in reality Satanic beings, come to torment the world, their appearance merely a trick by Lucifer—a fallen angel himself—to shake people's faith. *They* thought we were wonderful; they'd come down to the gate and wave flags

and Bibles at us and sing hymns and pray loudly for us. Often the two groups would get into a singing and yelling competition, each trying to drown the other out; and a couple of times they fell to beating the shit out of each other in front of God and the CNN cameras.

And yet they just might have been onto something, in an assbackward sort of way. At least some knowledgeable people had suggested that the old Biblical and medieval stories of angels with flaming swords might represent some earlier visitation.

Anyway, their ideas weren't any screwier than some of the other explanations you could hear. Like the story, widely believed in many parts of the world and among the looser-headed types in this country, that the angels were escapees from a secret CIA program. Somebody even made a movie about it.

I was living out in Glendale at the time, in a moderately crappy little duplex on a street with a silly name. At the front door I paused to empty the mailbox. As usual there was nothing but junk mail: subscription offers, solicitations for charity, a letter from my ex-wife's lawyer. I went inside and back to the kitchen, where I threw the lot into the trash bin.

I got a frozen pasta dinner out of the freezer and stuck it in the microwave and waited till the beeper beeped. I opened the box again and issued myself a beer and carried everything back into the living room. Then I sat down in the big chair and reached for the remote and switched on the TV and almost immediately said, "Oh, Christ."

The angels had gotten another airliner. Worse, it had crashed into a populous suburb of Melbourne, destroying homes and starting fires over a large area. "The fires seem to be under control now," an Australian-accented voiceover was saying, while the camera panned over a row of burning houses and then steadied on a group of men in firefighting outfits piling out of a truck. "There's still considerable danger, though, that they might spread. It's been very dry lately and the wind is picking up."

The scene shifted to a studio desk, where a man in a good suit, evidently the US anchor, was looking anxiously at the camera. "Still no figures," he asked, "on the number of dead and injured?"

"Still nothing official." Now the screen showed a thin young man holding a microphone. His short-sleeved khaki shirt was badly rumpled and his hair hung limp across his forehead; deep stress lines showed at the corners of his eyes and mouth. Behind him smoke rose above a scene of general destruction.

"But," he said, "I'd say it's got to be in the hundreds at least, even leaving aside the passengers and crew of the aircraft. This is a holiday here in Australia, so a lot of people were home."

Back to the anchor desk, where the suit said, "This just in: the aircraft has been identified as a Japan Air Lines Boeing 747, inbound from Tokyo. No further details at this time. We'll be right back."

The camera pulled back, as a different voiceover said, "This has been a special news bulletin, brought to you as part of our ongoing coverage of the HUE crisis. And now these messages from our local affiliates."

The picture dissolved into a view of a 777 under attack, with a garish

red-lettered legend TERROR IN THE SKIES. So they were still using that same stock photo, not that there were all that many available with the various governments sitting on most of them. Another fuzzy gun-camera shot, but you could clearly see the white forms of half a dozen angels crawling over the rear fuselage and the wing roots, with bright spots where their torches were cutting into the shiny metal. That particular plane had survived, thanks to a king-hell pilot and the nick-of-time arrival of the fighters, but it was still a stomach-churning picture.

I went ahead and ate my dinner and watched as more reports came in. They showed the wreckage of the JAL plane, or the biggest recognizable pieces; you could just make out that distinctive humped shape of the 747's upper forward section, lying amid the blackened ruins of several small houses.

There were no details on the attack, or how the angels had gotten past the escort. The Australians, from all I'd heard, had a first-class air security force, with their own specially designed planes. Maybe they'd gotten careless; somebody said they'd had very few attacks in the last year.

And then again maybe it was nobody's fault; maybe the angels had just been unusually lucky. Or unusually smart.

After an hour or so the suits ran out of new information and started repeating themselves. When they showed that damn photo again I grabbed the remote and switched channels at random.

A muscular man with his shirt off stared earnestly out at me and assured me that a revolutionary new exercise system would make me look just like him. I punched more buttons and finally found a panel discussion in progress on one of the allegedly educational channels. A liverish-looking woman with a bad hairdo was saying, "So the human race has finally made contact with an alien species, and what do we do? Kill them, or try to. It's so typical."

Beside her a willowy grey-haired man nodded slowly. "Yes. Typical, even predictable." He fluttered an elegant long-fingered hand. "The compulsion to destroy whatever we don't understand."

The camera switched to a bespectacled man at a lectern. "And to those who would ask, 'What about the attacks?'" he asked.

The woman shook her head impatiently. "Attacks?" I don't think we know enough about their motives to use that sort of judgmental language. 'Contacts' would be a better term. But," she went on, "if the governments of the world would give up this insane campaign to kill them off, and put the same effort and resources into trying to communicate with them, perhaps we could find out where they come from and what they want—"

"What they want?" I said aloud. "You useless cow, don't you watch the fucking news? Take a look at what they just did in Australia. That's what they want."

I gulped the rest of the beer and crumpled the can in my hand and threw it at the screen. It fell short and hit the floor, just as the willowy man said, "And anyway, what about the attacks by the United States on other countries and their people?"

I found the remote and hit the power button and watched the screen go black. Talking back to the people on TV now? Not a good sign. Definitely

need to get out more. Take up karaoke, maybe, or enroll in a square-dance class, or join a BDSM club.

There was a taste in my mouth like old pennies. I got up and headed toward the kitchen again to get another beer, but then I changed my mind and went into the bedroom and got the bottle of Scotch from the bedside table instead. Better go easy on the beer. When you spend half your waking life in the cockpit of a Pitts you have to watch your calories.

Next morning I assigned Lewis to my flight, switching Hardin to Alpha flight, which was short with Carmody away. Hardin wasn't happy about it but I told him the arrangement was temporary. I had a fairly good idea what was going to happen when Carmody got back.

For the rest of the week Lewis flew on my wing. There was no action, only routine patrols, but even that was enough to show that he hadn't just been on a hot streak that first day. God, he could fly. Even without the aerobatics, even with the most ordinary moves, you could see it: that intangible whatever-it-is that only a very few pilots have, that invests every movement of the aircraft with a special grace.

"I swear," Larabee said, "he looks good just sitting on the apron with the engine off. Can he shoot too?"

"Going by his scores from training school," I told her, "yes. Second in his class in marksmanship."

She'd brought up an important point. The one big shortcoming of the light gun is that you can only use it for a maximum of two seconds at a shot before it overheats; in fact there's an automatic cutoff to keep excited pilots from burning out the taxpayers' property. So you can't just spray a general area; you've got to use it more like a rifle than a machine gun. Which is why angel kills are so uncommon, and why a sharpshooter like Carmody was a top ace while someone like Orozco, who could outfly him forty ways but couldn't shoot worth a damn, never scored.

"All that and a tight little butt too," Larabee said. "If he were a woman I'd marry him."

Carmody was back the following Monday. I spent most of the morning in the office with him, going over various administrative details. Finally he said, "So. This new man, Lewis. Any good?"

I told him. He whistled. "Really? I was going to take him up for a little tryout, but I guess there's no point. If he can stay with you, then he can sure as hell stay with me." He snorted. "Hell, if he can stay with you, I probably can't stay with him."

That was a stunner; I almost felt like looking around for a ventriloquist. But then Carmody had been surprising me all morning. I'd been ready for him to be an even bigger pain in the ass than usual, but instead he seemed more human, less full of himself. Maybe getting what he was after had mellowed him a bit.

He leaned back in his chair and played a couple of arpeggios on the desk with his fingertips. "Well," he said, "I think we'd better put him in my flight, where I can keep an eye on him and teach him the ropes. I know you'll be glad to get Hardin back."

Stealing the hot new jock for his flight, just as I'd expected. That was more like the Carmody we all knew. It was a relief, really. When the Carmodys of the world quit acting like assholes it makes me nervous; you have to have some constants in life, so you don't lose your bearings.

And so Lewis became Carmody's wingman, and for the next few weeks they flew together, with Orozco and Robinson on their flank; and Lewis quit being the new guy and became just another name on the roster board. Everybody settled down again into the old routine, one day pretty much like another, not much excitement except now and then when the wind got crazy. A Pitts isn't an easy plane to land anyway—we used to say that there were two kinds of Pitts pilots, those who had groundlooped and those who were about to—and in a gusting crosswind it can be almost unbearably fascinating. You'd never have guessed it, though, watching Lewis come in with the wind blasting across the runway; he made it look not just easy but inevitable.

We did get one more angel attack, right after the first of the month, but it didn't amount to much. They materialized out over the Mesa area, eight or so of them, converging on a little Fokker 70 regional flight coming in from Albuquerque.

Delta flight was flying escort. Tsosie got an angel almost immediately and the others scattered and then started to vanish. They hadn't had a real shot at the Fokker anyway; they'd spawned too far astern of their target. The whole thing was over in hardly any time.

"They weren't very good," Tsosie said at the debriefing. "They didn't really seem to know what they were doing. The only smart thing they did was disappear when we came at them."

Carmody looked at me. "Hm. The last ones were like that too, weren't they?" And then quickly, "Well, maybe not *this* bad." After all, that had been the engagement that made him a big hero; mustn't imply that it had been a turkey shoot.

He laughed suddenly. "You suppose they've made Phoenix their training ground? Where they send their new guys to get some experience? Boy, did they ever pick the wrong place."

A couple of weeks later the angels showed up again.

Bravo flight caught the first contact. It was just before noon and we were escorting a Southwest 737 coming in from Tulsa. Off to the west Alpha flight was flying cover for a Fedex cargo plane taking off from the south runway. That was a situation nobody liked, when there were two planes to cover at the same time, and the controllers tried to avoid it but now and then it happened.

Phoenix is a little over eleven hundred feet above sea level, so by the time we picked up the 737 at five thousand he was already into his approach, wheels and flaps coming down as we fanned out behind him and a little above, Hardin and me to port and Sheridan and Foley to starboard. I glanced down to check airspeed—just under 150 knots, he was coming in a little hot but they all do that now, trying to reduce the danger period—and that was when the angels hit us.

Hardin's voice sounded in the earphones: "Hueys, eleven o'clock low!" I'd already seen them, though, spawning just astern of the 737's port wing, and Christ but there were more of them than I'd ever seen at one time, the air was full of white wings and not all of them going for the 737 either, several were coming straight toward *us*.

I pushed the Pitts's nose down and thumbed the safety cover off the firing button on top of the joystick and laid the gunsight's center pip on an angel coming at me head-on. The light beam flashed red on the middle of its body and I flinched instinctively as I flew through the explosion, but as usual there was no turbulence or heat or debris, or any other sign that anything had ever been there.

The flash had momentarily blinded me, though, and I leveled off to let my vision clear. I hit the com button to switch frequencies. "Alpha One," I called. "Alpha One, major attack. Can you assist?"

"Affirmative," Carmody came back immediately. "On our way, Bravo One."

By now I could see again. What I could see was almost enough to make me wish I couldn't. The angels were swarming over the 737, torches already glowing. Off to my right Sheridan was rolling frantically, trying to shake off an angel, while Foley hung on astern, his light gun intermittently flashing as he tried to pick the angel off.

I pulled the Pitts around and bore down on the 737, laying the sights on an angel doing something right above the main passenger cabin. I didn't hit it but I must have come uncomfortably close; it gave a sudden jump and flew upward, away from the 737. I watched the green LED below the gunsight, waiting for it to tell me that the light gun was ready to use again, but then Hardin yelled, "Bravo One, check six!"

I jerked around and looked back just in time to see a big white shape closing in fast from astern. I said, "Shit!" and flipped the Pitts onto its back and hauled back on the stick. At the bottom of the inverted loop I eased off on the stick and let the Pitts straighten out into a forty-five-degree zoom that I was pretty sure no angel could follow; they maneuvered like bats out of hell but they didn't have much of a climb.

I looked back but I didn't see the angel, or Hardin either. What I did see was a long dark gash across the skin of the Pitts's fuselage, just ahead of the vertical fin. My stomach did a slow roll; I hadn't realized the bastard was that close. A wonder it hadn't cut a control cable, but everything seemed to be working. But the evasive maneuver had taken me away from the main fight. I said into the mike, "Bravo two, you are released for independent action." Right now protecting the 737 took priority over covering my butt.

And it was in serious need of protection. Climbing back up to rejoin the action, I could see what was going on: the jetliner pilot had panicked and was trying to abort the landing and run out. Which wasn't necessarily a bad move—he had more than enough power to outrun any angel ever seen—but he was trying to climb, too, instead of holding altitude till he got some speed up, and that was killing him. Or was going to kill him, along with a bunch of other people, if we didn't do something fast, because by now the angels were all over him.

I saw Hardin come in over the 737's port wing and a moment later there was a big yellow flash right over the wing root as an angel explod-

ed. Another Pitts was moving up from astern—Sheridan or Foley, I couldn't tell which—and I was almost within range too, but we weren't going to be enough.

And then, by God, just like the good guys in an old movie, Carmody's flight arrived. All of a sudden there were black-and-white shapes streaking in head-on over the 737 and light guns flashing and two angels blew almost simultaneously.

The others rose up off the 737 like vultures flapping up from a carcass. Now was the time for them to do their vanishing act; but this bunch hadn't read the script or they'd said the hell with it. They went for the fighters.

I blew an angel off Robinson's five o'clock and came around to take a long shot at another one as it danced away from Orozco's fire. While the light gun cooled and recharged I made a fake pass at a couple that were closing in on Hardin, breaking up their attack and letting him climb clear. By now there was a full-scale furball going on, biplanes and angels whirling this way and that, light guns and torches flashing. It must have been a stirring sight for anyone watching from the ground. Close up, it was merely terrifying.

A white shape appeared in the mirror and I yanked the Pitts up in a tight Immelmann. As I rolled upright I heard Carmody's voice in the headset: "Alpha Two, clear me."

I looked around to see what was going on, but that angel was still after me and I had to do some tricky maneuvering to get rid of it. In the middle of a hard flick roll, though, I heard Carmody again, much louder and sharper: "Alpha Two, I say again, clear me!"

The angel dropped away at last and I leveled out just as Carmody's voice rose in a near-scream: "*Alpha Two, for God's sake get him off me!*"

Escaping the angel had left me well above everybody else, and the view through the cockpit-floor windows was too blurry to see anything. But I leaned far over to my left and stuck my head over the coaming and banked the Pitts a little to port and then I saw what was going on.

A big angel, maybe the biggest I'd ever seen, was right over Carmody's tail and moving in. Carmody wasn't taking any evasive action, and after a moment I saw why: his rear control surfaces were in blackened tatters. It was surprising he could even fly straight.

Lewis was sitting just astern, his nose not more than fifty feet behind Carmody's tail. He didn't seem to be doing anything else.

I cursed and whipped the Pitts over and down, leveling off a hundred yards or so behind the two biplanes and cramming on full throttle to overtake them. I couldn't see the angel; I could only see a little of Carmody's plane, because Lewis was in the way.

"Alpha Two," I called, "break left."

And, when he didn't: "Lewis, get the fuck out of the way!"

He didn't move. I hadn't really thought he would.

I said some more bad words and pulled up, over Lewis's plane, and rolled the Pitts onto her back. I caught a brief glimpse of Lewis sitting absolutely straight and still at the stick, his face hidden by his helmet's visor. I didn't really look at him, though; I was locked in on what was happening in front of him.

The angel was on top of Carmody's plane now. Its wings hid the cockpit area.

I pulled back on the stick, still flying inverted, to bring the gunsight to bear on the angel. It was an easy shot, even from that angle. I thumbed the trigger button, knowing it was too late.

The angel flashed and vanished. I rolled up and swung out to port, looking down. I could see into Carmody's cockpit now. Or what had been Carmody's cockpit. What was left in it now couldn't really be called Carmody any more.

The other angels were starting to wink out now. Off in the middle distance the 737 was climbing away, apparently undamaged.

Carmody's plane continued to fly straight and level for another minute or two. Then its starboard wingtips dropped and it fell away in a long spiral dive. I thought at first it was going to hit the university campus area but instead it smashed into the dry bed of the Salt River.

After a little while I shook myself like a wet dog and spoke into the mike again. "This is Bravo One," I said. "All pilots return to base. I say again: everybody go home."

Lewis was already standing beside his plane, taking off his helmet, when I came up behind him. He must have heard my boots on the concrete; he turned around to face me before I spoke.

"System malfunction, Lewis?" I asked. I didn't raise my voice. "Trouble with the gun and the radio?"

He swallowed hard; you could see his Adam's apple bobbing. He opened his mouth but nothing came out. He swallowed again and then, in a kind of dry croak, he said, "No, sir."

"Everything working properly?"

He nodded. His face was the color of cigarette paper.

"Thank you. That's what I needed to know."

I paused a moment, fighting for control. "Lewis," I said, still keeping my voice low, maybe not entirely steady. "Lewis, there'll be a formal inquiry into what happened up there and why. So you don't have to tell me anything. In fact I'm officially advising you not to."

He didn't respond. I said, "And besides, just between us and strictly off the record, I already know the story and you know I know it."

I wouldn't have thought he could go any paler, but he did. His lips worked soundlessly. "I," he finally got out. "I."

I said very quietly, "Couldn't do it, could you?"

The tears started coming then, trickling down on either side of his nose. "An angel," he said, nearly whispering. "An angel. I couldn't, I, how, how can anybody—"

He ran dry again. I said, "I know, Lewis. Trust me, you're not the first."

I turned and walked away, leaving him standing there alone. Maybe I should have said something to try to make him feel better, but I didn't really give a damn.

Off to the east you could just barely make out the smoke from Carmody's plane, already thinning and drifting away in the desert wind. O

THE TWO OLD WOMEN

Kage Baker

Kage Baker's most recent Company novel, *The Life of the World to Come*, has just been released. Ms. Baker resides in Pismo Beach, California, with a domineering parrot. In her latest story, she examines the long reach of some very dominating women.

The gulls rose from the evening water, glided out serene and pointed, each little pilot craning its neck to judge its way on sharp-curved wings. So high was the sea that the bright foam was driven on the wind, and cloudy air rolled in low above the little town. Backlit by the low sun, the long combers threw back manes of white salt mist, thundering up the sand. Boats rocked at anchor, battened down against autumn gales, and she could hear their blocks and tackle clinking even up where she sat.

The old woman gazed down at the harbor.

She wore black, being a widow, a little stumpy lady like a wooden post. When she had been a young wife, sitting in this same place, watching this same harbor, there had still been ships moored in the green water, and the horizon was all masts and spars. Gradually the masts had given way to steam, or diesel. Now only the sailboats bore canvas. Bright summer days they skimmed out there beyond the island, or tacked to and fro in the harbor. Not tonight.

Nobody ventured out tonight, except grandmothers in black. They went to St. Anthony's for evening mass, praying for their dead on All Souls' Night.

The old woman, though, remained in her chair. She was not a grandmother.

She sat there still as the sun sank, as the pink twilight fell. When the change in the wind came she felt it first, because her house sat high on the last street. She turned, peering. It was a hot wind, coming over the fields, and it smelled of mown hay and creek water. It flowed over her. It rolled down on the harbor. The mist fled before it, retreated out to sea, and the sea grew glassy and calm.

Her breath quickened, though her expression of stolid patience did not change. She rose, creaking, and went slowly into her house.

Inside her home was spartan and shabby, but scrupulously clean. One bare table with two chairs; one rug with a half-century's path worn across it, sun-faded. Only in one corner was there color, all around the tall shelf where the candles burned in their ruby glass cups before the image of the Blessed Mother. Here the old woman had set a vase of flowers, dark red roses from the schoolground fence, yellow chrysanthemums from her garden.

And here she had hung the pictures: the tinted photographs of a distant wedding day, a smiling bride and groom, a formal portrait of a handsome young man in his best suit.

She took off her shawl, tied on an apron. For the next four hours she worked very hard, pounding spices in a mortar, chopping greens, simmering broth. She roasted a formidable loin of pork with garlic, baked linguica with peppers, and crumbled crisp bacon into the *Caldo Verde*; but she prepared nothing with seafood of any kind. And in no dish did she use salt.

When things could be left over low heat, she went into the front room and laid the cloth carefully, set out the candlesticks. One place set, one bottle of black-red wine from a cupboard, a single fine glass. Half an hour before midnight, she set out the tureen, the platters of meat, the pan of cornbread. She poured a single glass of wine. She lit the tapers. She took another candle, a blue one, and set it in the window, carefully tying the curtains back.

Then she took off her apron, drew her shawl around her shoulders, and walked down to the harbor.

The wind had not changed. The air was clear, the darkness full of little flickering lights. It took her longer than it had used to, to get down to the mole, but she arrived before midnight. She waited, staring out into the night ocean.

At midnight she saw the white sail gliding in, as she had known it would. The black water was smooth as glass, the little fishing boat moved over it without a sound. She could see it clearly now. The timbers were rotted and festooned with rank weed, the paint bubbled and chipped away, and all the ironwork risen like biscuit with rust. But the sail was white and whole, belled out with phantom wind, bright with phantom sunlight. His face was bright, too, where he sat at the tiller.

He was still young.

He brought his craft up to the mole easily, tossed a loop of seaweed around a bollard and moored; stepped lightly out, with his duffel over his shoulder. He leaned down to kiss her. His lips moved as though he were speaking to her, gleeful and excited, but he wasn't making a sound.

He chattered away in perfect silence, all the way back through the town. He outpaced her easily, on his young long legs, and more than once had to stop and wait for her at a turn in the street. He looked a little puzzled at her slowness.

But they got to the top of the hill at last. He bounded up the steps of their house, opened the door for her, slung down his duffel and stood rubbing his hands together, eyeing the food greedily. As she closed the door, he was already pulling off his jacket and knitted cap. Where he dropped

them they became a soaked mass of rotten wool, and the duffel was black and sodden too.

He hitched his suspenders, sat down at the table, rolled up his long sleeves. Grinning, he helped himself to the food. Knife in one fist, fork in the other, he ate heartily, steadily, and set the fork down only to gulp the red wine. She sat across from him and watched. He smeared melting butter on the corn bread. He savored the pork crackling. Once or twice he looked around on the table, hunting for the salt; but as it wasn't there, he shrugged and went on eating.

When he had done, when the white candles had burned down a quarter of their length, he pushed his empty plate back and said something to her. He winked broadly. She rose and went into the bedroom, and he followed her.

There her young heart went out of her body, and the old woman sat weeping in a chair watching the young woman undress, and slip into bed. He shucked off his boots, his clothes—they fell to pieces on the floor, and water spread there in a dark stain on the rag rug. He climbed into bed with the phantom girl, and she lay in his arms.

Far into the night, as the young husband and wife slept, the old woman rose from her chair. She was moving more stiffly now, and her eyes were swollen from so much weeping, so she felt her way as though she were blind. She gathered up the ruined garments in her apron, carried them out to the garden, and laid them at the base of a tree. She collected the food from the table and carried it out there too. She got a shovel. Gasping, her old heart laboring, she dug a hole under the tree and buried the rags, the remains of the feast.

Then she went back into the house. She took a box from a cupboard and carried it outside again. Walking the perimeter of the garden fence, she laid down a line of white powder, very carefully. When she had drawn an unbroken circle around her home, she went back indoors. The sky was just getting light in the east.

She blew out the candles. The smoke rose, coiled.

The other old woman, in her house down the hill, woke a little while later. She dressed herself and, kneeling at her corner shrine, said a rosary. Sometimes her gaze was on the Blessed Mother's kind inscrutable face; sometimes on the framed photograph of the old man, sitting in after-dinner ease with a grandchild on either knee, and the ash falling from his cigar caught by the camera in midair forever.

But as she told her beads, the other old woman became aware of a sound. It could be heard above the diesel motors rumbling to life in the harbor, the raucous screaming of gulls following the trawlers out. After a moment she identified it as someone hammering, irregularly.

It continued as she rose and went to the kitchen. It counterpointed the rocking of the wooden bowl as she kneaded dough. It was still going, three taps and a pause, three taps and a pause, as she sliced potatoes and set them to fry in bacon grease.

At last she turned from the stove and went to the window above the sink. Parting the checked curtain, she squinted in the direction of the

sunrise. There was her sister's house, on its high ridge. She peered, rubbed her eyes, retrieved a pair of spectacles from her apron pocket and slipped them on. She saw a man on a ladder, putting new shingles on her sister's roof. The sun, just now reaching him, lit him up in gold.

The other old woman nodded in approval, and went back to the stove.

After a moment, though, she frowned. She looked out the window again, wiping her hands on her apron. At last she turned down the heat and left the kitchen, walking through the house.

Marco's bed was empty, neatly made, because he was away at boot camp. Danny was still asleep on his side of the room, snoring. The other old woman shook her head at the sport jacket lying where it had been thrown, the cigarette butts on the floor, the guitar. She picked up his discarded socks and went on.

Margaret Mary was in her room, sound asleep under the sultry gaze of Elvis on her tacked-up posters, and the other old woman spared her no more than a glance in before moving on. She looked in on the twins by habit, and caught them awake and clandestinely eating Halloween candy. One basilisk stare was all it took and they scrambled back into bed, huddling there as she retrieved tiny underwear and socks from their hamper.

Celia woke when she opened the door, though John slept through it. The other old woman left without a word, and had the first laundry load going when Celia shuffled into the kitchen in her bathrobe.

The hammering was still going on. Tap tap tap, pause.

"The wind's changed. It's coming from inshore, can you feel it? Going to be hot today," said Celia.

"Mm," said her mother.

"Mama," said Celia, clearing her throat, "You don't have to fry up so much linguica in the morning. The kids want Corn Pops."

"Danny likes it," said her mother. "Did you tell Rosalie to get Jerry to fix Tia Adela's roof?"

"No, Mama." Celia yawned, and got a can of coffee down from the cupboard. "I told you, Danny's going to do it. He promised me."

"Well, somebody's up there now," said her mother, parting the curtain once again. Celia blinked, came and stared.

"Who's that?"

"Not Danny," said her mother.

"Huh," said Celia, troubled. But she went to the breadbox, methodically laid out sandwiches for the school lunches: Peanut butter for the twins, tuna salad for Margaret Mary. Three brown paper bags, three oranges, three dimes for milk. Rituals for the living.

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Not another word was said on the subject of Tia Adela's roof, as the household was fed, as the children were sent to school, as John went to work at the boatyard, as Danny was coaxed out of bed, bullied into eating linguica and onions despite his hangover and sent on his way to the new job at the fish market, as the clean wet clothes went out on the line to dry.

But when the house was quiet and well-ordered again, the other old woman looked meaningfully at her daughter and pulled on her shawl. Celia followed her out the door, fanning herself with a piece of newspaper.

"Mama, it's hot," she complained. "You don't have to wear that thing." But her mother ignored her, and they were silent the rest of the way up the hill to Tia Adela's house.

The hammering was still going on. They could see the edge of the ladder poking up over the roofline, but they could not see the workman until they walked out to the edge of the street and turned.

The other old woman said nothing, but she made the sign of the cross involuntarily. Celia shaded her eyes against the sun with her newspaper. "I'm sweating to death, Mama," she muttered, studying the workman. Nobody she knew, though he was certainly good-looking: long lean back bronzed by the sun, a mermaid tattooed on his right arm. His hair was a little long; his wool trousers were a little tight.

"Hello?" she called. "Mister?"

He did not reply. He did not even turn his head; just reached over and took the last tarpaper shingle from its box, and tacked it in place.

"Hey!" Celia called, when he paused to wipe his forehead. He did not appear to notice her. His lips were moving as though he were singing to himself, though he was not making a sound. He dropped his hammer, climbed briskly down the ladder and walked out of sight behind the house.

"I wonder if he's deaf?" said Celia. "I'll bet that's what it is, Mama. She's hired one of those handicapped guys from St. Vincent de Paul's, huh? Danny would have gotten around to it," she added plaintively. "Gee, now I feel bad."

Her mother did not reply.

"Mama, maybe we should knock on the door, see if Tia Adela's okay," said Celia. "Some of those guys are a little crazy, you know?"

"No," said her mother. "We're going home."

She said it in such a way Celia knew there was no point arguing. They walked back down the hill.

Once or twice, at night, the hot wind brought the lowing of cattle from the big ranch far up the canyon. By day, the twins and Margaret Mary sweated in their blue woolen school uniforms. Rosalie, miserable in the heat, fled her tiny apartment and walked up the street to sit on the porch swing with her mother. The radio blared from the house behind them.

"Did you throw up every damn morning like this?" she asked querulously, raising her voice to be heard over Perry Como.

"Only with you and Marco," Celia replied. "All I could eat for a month was green grapes and crackers. It'll get better, sweetie."

"I sure hope so," sighed Rosalie. "Were you bothered by smells, too? I opened a can of sardines, and I swear I nearly died."

"Good thing Jerry's not in port right now, then," joked her mother, but Rosalie did not smile.

"I miss him already," she said, staring out at the sea in resentment. "I had bad dreams last night. It's too late in the year to go out so far, don't you think?"

"It's still summer," said Celia, waving at the electric fan. "Summer in November, for God's sake. And they have to make money while they can, you know."

"It's not fair," said Rosalie. Her mother looked at her sidelong.

"*You* married him," she said. "I told you, didn't I? Marry a Souza, an Avila or a Machado, and half the year he'll be out there on a trawler. And the other half of the year your house will stink like fish."

"Maybe he can get a job at the boatyard with Daddy," said Rosalie. Celia made a noncommittal noise. Rosalie lifted her head to watch a leaf floating down the wind. Her gaze fell on the house against the skyline.

"Don't tell me you got Danny to paint Tia Adela's house!" she said.

Celia looked unhappy.

"No. She has some boy from St. Vincent de Paul's up there, or maybe the Salvation Army."

"It's looking really nice," Rosalie observed, standing to see better. "See, all those hedges have been cut back. Somebody took down that big dead tree! Jerry was going to do that for her, when he got around to it," she added, a little uncomfortably.

Celia shrugged. Rosalie's face brightened.

"Gee, do you think she's getting it fixed up to sell? Like, maybe she's going to move into a home? Maybe you could talk to her about giving it to Jerry and me instead. We really need the room."

"I don't talk much to Tia Adela," said Celia. "Anyway, sweetie, it's her house."

"But we're young," Rosalie groaned. "What does she need with a whole house?"

That night the wind changed again.

The temperature dropped. A long swell rolled in from the sea, and by midnight the surf was booming on the mole. Mist rolled in too, white under the stars. It brought the smell of salt, of seawrack and low tide.

Tia Adela, dozing in her chair, started awake. The young man was sitting up in bed, staring at the window. Without even looking back at the girl, he slipped out of bed and drew on the clothes she had laid out for him, the wool and linen that was yellowed but none the worse for having spent a half-century packed in a trunk. He opened the window and drew in a deep breath of sea air.

Turning, he walked out of the bedroom. Tia Adela followed him as far as the front door. He gave her an apologetic grin as he slipped out, ran lightly down the steps. A pink quarter-moon hung low in the west, sending a faint track across the water. He paced down the walk as far as her front gate. But, extending his hand to open it, he faltered; drew back. Two or three tries he made, and couldn't seem to reach it.

He looked down, at the trail of white stuff that crossed his path. He be-

gan to walk along it, seeking a way through, and followed its unbroken line all around the house, dodging through her garden, stumbling around behind the woodshed and the blackberry hedge, before he arrived at the front walk again.

He turned to look up, pleading silently with Tia Adela. She shook her head. Shoulders sagging, he came back up the walk and climbed the steps. He collapsed into a chair. She brought the wine and poured out a glass for him. He drank it down. It seemed to make him feel better.

In the morning he went out and spaded up her vegetable garden, whistling to himself in silence. She watched him from the window. Now and again she raised her head to look at the sky, where far to the north a thin silver wall of cloud was advancing. The sea was growing rough; it had turned a milky and ominous green, mottled here and there with purple weed.

"The glass is falling," stated the other old woman. Nobody paid any attention to her except Margaret Mary, who came to look at the barometer. Margaret Mary wore glasses, braces, had frizzy hair and freckles. She was the sort of girl who would be genuinely interested in barometer readings.

"Somebody ought to go," Rosalie was insisting. "She could be lying dead up there, for all anybody knows. Maybe she's had a stroke or something, and the man is some hobo who's just moved in. Maybe he's stealing from her."

"I guess we ought to be sure she's okay," Celia said, glancing uneasily at her own mother.

"Don't you think somebody needs to check on her, Nana Amelia?" Rosalie demanded. "And if she's okay, well, that gives you an opportunity to talk about leaving the house to Jerry and me."

Nana Amelia gave her a dark look. "It's not a lucky house," she said.

"Why don't we all go?" suggested Celia. "That way, if he's trouble, we can send Margaret Mary for the cops."

"Okay!" said Margaret Mary.

Nana Amelia sighed, but she drew on her shawl.

They set off up the street. The three women walked in close formation, arms crossed tightly under their breasts. Margaret Mary followed behind, hands thrust into the pockets of her school sweater, staring up at the clouds and therefore stumbling occasionally.

"Those are cumulonimbuses," she said. "And, uh, stratocumuluses. I think we're going to get a heck of a storm."

Nana Amelia nodded grimly.

They came to the front gate and looked up. The house was tidy, trim as a ship, with its new coat of paint. The doorknob and the brass lamp had been polished until they gleamed. The weeds had been cleared from either side of the walkway and the chrysanthemums staked up, watered, all swelling buds and yellow stars.

The women stared. As they stood there, Tia Adela came around the side of the house, carrying a basketful of apples. She halted when she saw them; but the young man who followed her did not seem to see. He simply stepped around her, and proceeded up the steps. He was carrying a dusty box full of mason jars and lids. He went into the house.

"What do you want?" said Tia Adela.

"We came up to see if you were all right," said Celia reproachfully. "Tia Adela, who's that boy?"

Tia Adela looked at her sister.

"You really shouldn't have strangers up here, Tia Adela," said Rosalie. "We were thinking, maybe you shouldn't live all alone nowadays, you know what I mean?"

"Yes," said Tia Adela. "I thought so too."

"And I was looking in the phone book, and there's this nice place called Wyndham Manor in San Luis, where they'd take—"

"You have offended God!" shouted Nana Amelia hoarsely. She was trembling.

Celia and Rosalie turned to gape at her.

"I don't care," said Tia Adela. "And He has said nothing. But *she's* angry, oh, yes." And she nodded out at the sea, wild and sullen under slaty cloud.

"Mama, what's going on?" said Celia.

Nana Amelia pointed up at the window. The young man was standing behind it, gazing out at the dark sea with an expression of heartbreaking longing.

"That is her husband," she said.

There was a moment's stunned silence, and then Celia said, very gently: "Mama, Tio Benedito has been dead since before I was born. Remember? I think we'd better go home now, okay?"

Her mother gave her such a look of outrage that she drew back involuntarily.

"Don't be stupid," said Nana Amelia. She stormed forward and up the steps, and Celia and Rosalie ran after her, protesting. Tia Adela shrugged and followed slowly. Margaret Mary came with her.

The young man at the window didn't seem to notice the women bursting into the room. Nana Amelia went straight to the wedding photograph on the wall, grabbed it down and thrust it in Celia's face.

"There! Her Bento. See? Dead as a stone. He went out past Cortes Shoals after rockfish, too late in the year. A lot of fools went out. The *Adelita*, the *Meiga*, the *Luisa* all went down in the gale, even the big *Dumbarton*! So many dead washed up on the beach, they loaded them on a mule wagon. Bento, they didn't find. The sea kept him. And *she* never forgave God!" Nana Amelia turned in wrath to her sister, who had come in now and set her basket of apples on the table.

Celia, who had taken up the photograph, looked from it to the young man by the window. Rosalie peered over her shoulder.

"Mama, this is crazy," said Celia. "Things like this don't happen."

"So . . . he's a ghost?" said Margaret Mary, peering at Bento. "And he's come back to her? Just like he was? Wow! Only . . ." She looked sadly at her great-aunt. "Only, you're *old*, Tia Adela."

Tia Adela folded her arms defiantly. "I know," she said. "But I have him back. She can call him, she can beat herself white on the rocks, but she can't climb up here. He and I will stay safe in my house, let her gale blow hard as it will."

"Who is this other lady she's talking about?" Rosalie murmured to her mother.

"Adela, don't be stupid!" said Nana Amelia. "You know what will happen."

"This Wyndham Manor you called, how much does it cost?" Celia inquired of her daughter *sotto voce*.

"Look, whoever you are, you'd better go now," Rosalie said, turning to Bento. "Do you hear me? Go back to St. Vincent's or wherever she hired you from."

He made no reply. She strode across the room to him. "Hey! Can you hear me?"

She grabbed him by the arm and then she screamed, and staggered back. Celia was beside her at once, catching her before she fell. Bento had not moved, had not even turned his head.

"Honey, sweetie, what is it?" Celia cried.

Rosalie was gulping for breath, her eyes wide with horror. She was holding her hand out stiffly. Her mother closed her own hand around it and recoiled; for Rosalie's hand was as cold as though she'd been holding a block of ice, and as wet, and gritty with sand.

"Should I go get Father Halloway?" asked Margaret Mary.

"No," said the women in unison.

"I don't see why you're all so mad, anyhow," said Margaret Mary. "I think it's neat. If we can really bring the dead back, so we won't be lonely—well—wouldn't that be great? You could still have Grandpa to talk to, Nana! How'd you do it, Tia Adela?"

Tia Adela said nothing, watching Bento. He was pacing back and forth before the window.

"She made a Soul Feast," said Nana Amelia. "Didn't you, Adela?"

"You mean she just cooked some food?" Margaret Mary cried. "Is that all it takes? Can anybody do that?"

"Not everybody," said Tia Adela, curling her lip. "And food is not enough. There must be love that is stronger than death."

"Oh," said Margaret Mary.

"It's *wrong*, child," said Nana Amelia. "The dead don't belong to us! And they want their rest. Look at him, Adela, does he look happy? You have to let him go."

"How are you keeping him here?" asked Rosalie in a little voice, the first time she had spoken since she'd learned the truth. Celia, sitting with her arm around her, shook her head.

"Sweetie, don't ask—"

"Borax," said Tia Adela.

"What?"

"Borax," Tia Adela repeated, with a certain satisfaction. "I poured a line of it all along the fence, and he can't cross it."

"Jesus Christ, Tia Adela, you put down borax powder for *ants*, not ghosts!" yelled Celia.

"It's alkali, isn't it?" said Tia Adela. "The opposite of salt. So it breaks the spell of the sea."

"Um . . . but alkali isn't the opposite of salt, Tia Adela," said Margaret Mary, wringing her hands. "It's the opposite of acid. We learned that in chemistry class."

Tia Adela shrugged. "It still works, doesn't it?"

A gust of wind hit the windows, whirling brown leaves. A gull swept in close, hung for a moment motionless at eye level before gliding away downwind. Rosalie shivered.

"No, I'm not letting him go," Tia Adela went on, in a harder voice. "Fifty years I've sat up here, and I got old, yes, and she's still beautiful; is that fair?"

"There will be a price to pay," said Nana Amelia.

Tia Adela did not reply. Bento sighed, making no sound, but far out and high up a gull mourned.

"Go away now," said Tia Adela. "I've got his dinner to fix."

Rain advanced like a white curtain. The leaden sea turned silver before it vanished in the squall. One by one the trawlers came in, fleeing for their lives, ramming the pier in their haste to moor. The crews scrambled ashore dripping, dodging the waves that were breaking over the pier. A police cruiser pulled up to the mole with its red light flashing, and cops in black slickers set sawhorses across the walkway.

Nobody was fool enough to go out there, though. The harbormaster sighed, looking at the moored sailboats; half of them would be on the beach, or matchwood, by morning.

The cars were pulling up now to the foot of the pier, and women and old men were getting out, squinting into the flying rain, leaning over as they walked into the wind. Soaked before they reached the harbormaster's office, they came one after another and asked: Was there news of the *Medford*? Was there news of the *Virginia Marie*?

They came away with faces like stone, and went back to their cars and sat, steaming up the windows, except for a couple of the old men, who splashed away through puddles to the Mahogany Bar and could be glimpsed thereafter at the window, looking like fish in a lit aquarium, drinking steadily as they waited.

Night closed down. One by one the headlights came on, pointed out to sea. When the waves began to break over the edge of the parking lot, the cops came and made the cars move back; but they did not leave, and they did not turn out the headlights.

Then there was a confusion of shouting, of horns and red lights, and

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Margaret Mary started awake as the car doors were flung open. She had to wipe her steamed glasses clear before she could see her mother and father hurrying through the rain, splashing through the long beams of light, calling after Rosalie who was sprinting ahead as fast as she had ever gone in her life.

And beyond her—Margaret Mary took her glasses off, wiped them again and stared openmouthed. Impossibly huge, bizarrely out of context with her prow almost on the asphalt, the *Virginia Marie* lay beached and rolling. Men clung to her, shouting, staring at the solid world of automobiles and houses and warmth, just within reach and terrible yards away, as the black water, the white water kept breaking over them, and the rain glittered and ran.

Sirens howled; a big ambulance pulled up, and another police car. People were crowding too close for Margaret Mary to see much, until the ropes were rigged and the rescued began to arrive on shore, huddled at once in blankets.

The crowd parted. Mary Margaret saw a blanketed man with his wet hair plastered down, and he was talking earnestly to Rosalie. Rosalie put her hands to her face and screamed. She just kept screaming, until at last John lifted her in his arms and dragged her back to the car, with Celia running after weeping. Margaret Mary wept too, withdrawing into her seat. Through her tears she mumbled the Our Father; though a cold adult voice in her head told her it was a little late for that.

“Daddy, what happened?” she begged, as he thrust Rosalie into the back seat beside her and slammed the door. For all anybody noticed her or answered, she might have been a ghost. Celia reached into the back and gripped Rosalie’s hands, and held on to them all the way up the hill to the house.

It was an hour later before she heard the story from her father, as he sat in the kitchen in his bathrobe, over strong coffee with whiskey in it: how the *Virginia Marie*’s radio mast had gone by the board, how she had been making her way back, how they had come upon the *Medford* taking on water and listing, how they had managed to take her crew off; and how Jerry had just gotten the last man aboard and was pulling in the lifeline when he had fallen, and dropped between the two hulls like a stone.

There had been no sign of him, in the rain and the night, and he might have answered their calls—one crewman swore he had heard him answer, and had thrown out a life preserver in that direction—but the wind was so loud they couldn’t be certain. Then suddenly the *Virginia Marie* had her own problems, and no man aboard had thought to come home again. Yet—

“Only Jerry lost,” said her father, and had a gulp of his coffee. “Can you beat that?”

“But he might have made it,” Margaret Mary protested. “Maybe he caught the life preserver. Maybe they’ll find him tomorrow when it’s light!”

“Yeah,” said John wearily. “Sure, honey.”

Margaret Mary looked out between the curtains, up through the night at the warm light glowing in Tia Adela’s window.

* * *

She slept on the couch in her clothes, because they had put Rosalie to sleep in her bed. Just after seven she rose, put on her glasses and stood at the front window, blinking out at the day. The rain had stopped, the wind dropped, though it was still gusting cold fitfully. The *Virginia Marie* was working apart fast, and there was a big crack in the parking lot where her prow had acted like a wedge on the asphalt. More yellow sawhorses blocked it off. Sailboats were lying all along the tideline, and one actually had come to rest on the boardwalk.

Turning, slipping off her glasses to rub her gritty eyes, she heard sudden footsteps from the hall.

Rosalie was up and dressed, pulling on one of her father's coats. Nana Amelia was right behind her, looking unstoppable. After them Celia came, hopping as she tried to put on her shoes while following.

"Sweetie, you need to stay here and rest—" she entreated, but Rosalie ignored her mother.

"Where are you going?" asked Margaret Mary.

"Where do you think?" said Rosalie, in a furious voice, flinging open the door and marching out, as Nana Amelia pulled on her shawl.

Margaret Mary stuck her feet in her saddle oxfords and clumped hurriedly along after them, running to catch up.

The rain had packed down the line of borax before Tia Adela's gate, but had not washed it away. Tia Adela and her husband were out in the garden. She had filled another basket with windfall apples, and he was sawing loose a bough that had been broken by the storm. He did not look up as Rosalie threw the gate wide and shrieked,

"Let him go!"

Tia Adela lifted her head, gazed at them. She looked down at the harbor, where the *Virginia Marie* wallowed broken in the surf.

"This has come of your wickedness, you see?" Nana Amelia told her sternly. "And her child needs a father, Adela."

"Please, Tia Adela! For the baby's sake!" Celia implored.

Tia Adela looked hard at Rosalie, who was scuffing through the line of borax with all her might. She grimaced, looking for a long moment as though she'd tasted poison.

"That won't do it," she sighed. She went to the shed and got a broom. Casting a long regretful look over her shoulder at Bento, she walked to the front gate.

"Stand back," she said. They shuffled out of her way and she swept the borax aside, in a white fan like a bird's wing.

The sun broke through, a long beam brilliant and white, whiter still for the seabirds that rose in a circling cloud through it, crying and calling.

"Look at the rainbow!" cried Margaret Mary, and they all looked up at the great arch that spanned the harbor, in colors so intense they nearly hurt the eye.

When they looked down again, they saw the car pulling up.

It was black, and long, and so, so expensive. The dashboard was inlaid with patterns in mother-of-pearl, all shells and mermaids and scalloped waves; the upholstery was sea-green brocade. The chrome gleamed as though it were wet.

And she who sat at the wheel was exquisitely dressed, tapping with her ivory fingers on the wheel, just a little impatient. Though her face was that of a skull, her very bones were so beautiful, so elegant, as to inspire self-loathing in any woman with a face of flesh (too fat!).

She hit the horn. It sounded like a foghorn.

The mortal women heard the quick footsteps behind them, felt the ice-cold touch as Bento shoved through them in his haste to go. He was smiling wide as he got into the car, didn't so much as look back once. He closed the door. The car glided away down the hill without making a sound. The women stood there, looking after it.

"Bitch," they said in unison, and with feeling.

But before noon the Coast Guard had picked up Jerry from the swamped and drifting derelict *Medford*, that he had been able to scramble aboard somehow, and they brought him home to Rosalie's waiting arms.

Seven years later, though, in another November, his luck ran out. The *Star of Lisbon* was lost with all hands. The Old Woman of the Sea is a poor loser, but she is a worse winner.

Rosalie wore black, and once or twice a week climbed the long street to Tia Adela's house, carrying Maria and tugging little Jerry by the hand. Jerry sat in the middle of the faded rug with his toy tractors and trucks, running them to and fro while Maria napped, and Rosalie learned how to make the old dishes: *Caldo Verde* with bacon, linguica with sweet peppers, garlic pork roast.

And she waited for the wind to change. O

TIMEFLOOD

Why did they dam the river of time some way upstream?
How did they dam time itself? Maybe they fought—will fight—a probability war, striving to block some streams of possibility and reinforce others. A myriad dams might be made. Sabotage may ensue, and rival dams, to divert events a different way.

The result is that time flooded backward catastrophically, causing such eddies and whirlpools and deeps and shallows.

A billion people lived their whole lives in mere seconds and expired in ignorance. Others were flotsam on the flood, seeing cities and civilizations rise and fall around them.

Caught up in an eddy, a mother-to-be found herself kneeling at the grave of her great-granddaughter. Stretched by the current, a soldier shot dead in a two-minute war suckled for centuries at his mother's tit. By the time he hit the ground a glacier was engulfing the battlefield.

And me? And me? She grew instantly old
in my shrinking arms as I became a child again,
held tight by a blind crone. I lead her along
by her wrinkled hand, my grandmother so it seems,
who still whispers endearments toothlessly

As we make our way though the ruins of millennia,
wrecked rude huts, tumbled temples of marble,
fallen castles, twisted girders of skyscrapers,
and so much mud where at least food grows,
in search of an Eden from where time may have sprung,

A fountain of youth to restore to her some
of my unwanted juvenility. But this Earth
of multiple eras is vast, survivors are few
and mostly insane, and yesterday for the first time
I saw, to my horror, the corpse of a dinosaur.

—Mike Allen and Ian Watson

PARACHUTE KID

Edd Vick

Edd Vick's previous appearance in *Asimov's* was "First Principles" in September of 2003. He continues to work for the adoption agency through which he and his wife, SF author Amy Thomson, adopted. In his latest tale, he takes a look at what it means to be a person who just drops in.

I pegged the big black woman as trouble immediately. She had that oh-so-concerned look people only get when they're about to screw you over. She came into our trig class with Principal Peters and walked directly to Mr. Brown's desk. They went into a huddle just as Lee snapped the paper football I'd folded past my ear, and held out two thumbs-up. I wasn't watching because I wanted to keep one eye on that huddle and the other on my path to the window. I figured it was the second fastest way out of the room, in case it was me they were after. The fastest I'd reserve for a *real* emergency.

"He scores!" Lee followed with that sound that's like a faraway crowd cheering.

"Lee Tsien Chen," said Brown, pointing our way. "Second row."

Lee froze. The woman lumbered over and he used both hands to pull himself out of his desk and to his feet, looking down. If there's one hard and fast rule about dealing with adults, that's it. Never look them in the eye. It makes you harder to call on, it pisses them off, and you don't have to look at their wrinkled skin. Three for the price of one.

"Hello, Lee," she said. "My name is Margaret Carter. I'm with the—" She saw me watching, and lowered her voice. I still caught it. "U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Come with me, please."

Lee shot me a look.

The USCIS. I knew she was trouble.

Lee didn't show up the rest of the day. I hustled to my bike and rode to his apartment, part of a large complex that was all empty fields not long ago. He and his "aunt" live clear on the other side of Costa Mesa, not far from John Wayne International. I'd like to have a car to drive to high school, but there's too much paperwork involved; too many ways I could screw it up. On a bike, I'm just another kid.

His paper auntie opened the door and said something in Chinese. I took it for an invitation and entered. As usual, it took my eyes a minute to adjust. The bright sun outside would have a hard time competing with the dazzle of red and gold inside Lee's home. They're lucky colors, and his parents were more than wealthy enough to buy him the best of everything, so long as it was in shades of gold and scarlet.

I walked to his room. The apartment always smells wonderful, part open-air spice market, part fishing boat. I often eat there.

Lee was in his room, asleep on top of the Lakers bedspread. Weird thing: he'd shaved his head. I saw clumps of hair all around the bed as I was waking him.

"Sam! Aw, Jesus." There were tear tracks down his face, and he coughed a couple of times. "She's going to send me back."

"Back" would be bad. China was as familiar to him as Mars was. He'd been in Southern California for ten years.

"We'll get you hidden away," I said. "Stay with me tonight."

He didn't argue, he never does. He just threw a few things into his backpack and grabbed his keys. On the way out the door, he said something short to his auntie. She shrugged.

We threw his pack and my bike into his gold BMW and peeled out.

"What's with the hair?" I asked, shoving the cap forward on his head to rub at his bare scalp. He swerved back and forth, trying to swat at my hand.

"We do that to get ready for tests," he said. "SATs are next month."

"We?"

"My people."

"Oh, suddenly you're all Asian."

"Fuck you."

I guessed what he'd been thinking. If he was going to be sent back to China as an "unaccompanied minor," at least he could look like he'd been studying. Like he hadn't been staying out all night with me at the twenty-four-hour noodle shops in Chinatown. "Tell me about that Immigration woman."

"She's a bitch, wants to send me back, end of story." If the steering wheel hadn't been made of metal, it would've snapped in his hands. Then, softer, he said, "Something tipped them off. They found out both my parents are in China, and that the woman I'm with isn't a relation."

"Shit." I looked out the window as he turned onto my street.

"Another couple of months and I would've graduated."

That's when I saw the guy.

"Lee! Don't stop in front. Drive around the corner."

He was startled, but used to doing what I said. We parked in the alley behind my place. Once in the house, I ran upstairs and into the front bedroom. Getting down on all fours, I crawled to the window and raised my head until I could just see over the sill.

In our neighborhood, we keep to ourselves, nodding at each other while mowing our tiny lawns or taking out the trash, but not speaking. We all know each other, though, and I didn't recognize the guy sitting at the bus stop across the street. He obviously *didn't* know that buses had stopped

coming through here years ago. The graffiti would've tipped him off, if it hadn't been everywhere else too.

He was watching my house. I figured he was another USCIS agent.

Lee crawled up next to me and looked out. "Why's he got a raincoat? Is it dripping?"

A wet raincoat? Now, in Orange County? It hadn't rained in weeks. "Shit!" I jumped to my feet and started waving my hands, but just then an SUV drove by, and when it was past, he was gone.

"Where'd he go?" asked Lee. There was no place the guy could have run to fast enough for us to miss him.

He'd *twisted*, but I wasn't going to tell Lee that. I hadn't told him who I really was in the four years since we'd met. Now was no time to start.

The next morning, I was up before Lee and scratching together a breakfast when somebody knocked at the front door, then rang the bell. I ignored it. I'd decided to pretend nobody was home while Lee was here. I grabbed plates and silverware, setting two places.

I was finishing up a half-hour later when the knock came again, then the doorbell. Same pattern, so I figured it was the same person. I ignored it, and carried my dishes to the counter a few minutes later.

There, looking in the window over the sink, was USCIS Agent Carter. I dropped my glass. She smiled and gestured for me to open the kitchen door.

I figured I could always *twist* if she was here to take me into custody. Well, try to, anyway. So I opened the door.

"Hello. You're Samuel Nelson?"

"Yes," I said. "I saw you yesterday."

"My name is Margaret Carter—"

"Tell me something I don't know."

"They told me at your high school that you're Lee Tsien Chen's friend." She walked past me into the kitchen. She looked at the extra place I'd set at the table. At the eggs and the pancakes waiting there. "He's in the United States without supervision, in violation of his student visa. It happens a lot in Southern California; we call children like him 'Parachute Kids.' Where is he, Samuel?"

"Beats me," I said. "My pop just finished eating." I indicated the dishes in the sink. "He works nights, so he has to get his sleep." I hoped I wasn't going to have to prove a point by eating Lee's food, on top of my own breakfast.

Her sharp gaze darted around the room and she poked her head into the den. I was sure there wasn't anything downstairs to rouse suspicion; I'd always kept it clean and innocuous. Gramps had taught me that, just as he'd been taught in his own youth.

There was a cough from upstairs. The watchful look left her eyes, and I silently thanked Lee for his quick thinking. He'd hardly make noise if he were hiding.

"Well," she said. "If you see Lee, tell him his mother needs him in China. He should be there for his father's funeral."

Funeral. So that was what had tipped the USCIS off. Damn, no wonder he'd been crying.

Lee coughed twice more as she was leaving. By the front door this time.

I took the stairs two at a time. Rounding the corner to the back bedroom, I started talking before I got there. "Damn, Lee! Good idea, but don't overdo it, huh?" Then I got to the door and stopped.

Lee was on the floor next to the bed. At first, I wasn't sure if he was breathing, then saw him take a shallow breath and break into racking coughs. When they subsided, he stayed on the floor.

I got him to the bathroom, where he retched weakly into the toilet.

He slumped down against the wall.

I poured him some water and squatted down across from him. "You need to go to the doctor."

He shook his head, probably afraid talking would start his cough again.

"If I call nine-one-one from here, that USCIS agent might find out you were here and deport you. If I drop you off at Hoag Hospital anonymously, you'll be okay."

He shook his head again, then coughed. Coughed. Hugging both arms around his chest, he knocked his head back against the wall several times, muttering "damn" between the last few coughs.

Finally, he stopped coughing and hung his head between his knees. Spreading from the bridge of his nose outward a faint red Rorschach grew, like a light sunburn. It had the shape of a butterfly.

I got up. It was time to call for an ambulance.

Just then, there was a pounding on the door. Not the front door. The bathroom door, right next to me.

I couldn't help it, I was so startled. I *twisted*.

I wouldn't be surprised to come out of a twist one of these days with my head on backward.

This time, it wasn't so bad. I took a quick assessment of myself. There was a pain in my left side, like I'd stretched too far the other way, and my back hurt over my right shoulder blade. I pulled at my shirt and found a large hole with rough edges. There wasn't much blood. Like I said, not so bad.

I was on the ground in a small stand of trees, mostly mesquite, walnut, and loblolly pine, so I pegged it for the Southwest. The grass was well-tended. It looked like a park, so I hadn't gone too far back. The sun was low; it was early morning or late evening. I knew there was a fire nearby, or soon would be. There always is, after a blind twist.

I'd barely made my way through the trees, to find a sidewalk bordering a street, when there was a tremendous explosion from beyond the low buildings across the way. Two of the buildings were simply thrown away in the shockwave like matchstick houses. I saw a plume of thick black smoke shoot skyward. Luckily, I was protected by a sturdier structure, a bank. In glancing back down, I read the bank's name, and knew with a chill where I was. *When* naturally followed.

Texas City, Texas. April 16, 1947.

I had to see the heart of the conflagration. I closed my eyes, took a half-breath, and let the fire pull at me. I twisted.

I landed on my feet right up against the railing that ran along the edge of the wharves. Nobody paid attention to me—all eyes were on the ship. In the harbor, the *Grand Camp* had been burning for more than an hour, sending up flames that captivated everyone. They were the most intense orange anyone had ever seen, the orange of ammonium nitrate bound for wartorn Europe.

The crowd of men and women—and many children—around me was still alive. They wouldn't be much longer. They were watching the fire-fighters arcing their paltry columns of water at the blaze. I peered around, looking through the crowd, watching for—

There! A flicker in the air, and I was seeing a shape come into being and drop to the dock. A five-year-old boy with blood starting to well to the surface on his upper arm. He was naked and grinning. People around him backed away.

I had less than twenty seconds. That first blast, the one I had seen from the other side of the bank, was coming. I had twisted back in time almost a minute. I ran, pushing people aside, and grabbed the boy, and he was squirming against me, trying to turn his head to look out to sea at what we both knew was coming, what we could both feel building, what drew us to itself, and I screamed as the explosion blossomed, and hugged him to me, and

twisted

—London. Horses squealing, their carriages and the houses all around blazing. Twist.

—A forest. They all look alike to me when they're on fire. Twist.

—New York. An early September morning. One tower was aflame and we could both hear the other jet. Twist.

—Texas City again. The day after my first twist, just after midnight, and the *Grand Camp*'s sister ship *The High Flyer* was about to explode, taking with her the *Wilson B. Keene* and the Monsanto plant. Twist.

—Another forest, this one not yet ablaze. I could feel it coming, though. It was in the air, so charged that I felt all my hair lifting away from my skin. The boy squirmed in my grasp, not trying to twist away but looking all around him for the spark, the fire, the explosion.

The trees were all around us. No clearings, nowhere to get away from the inferno I knew was coming except to twist. But I was so tired, so scraped up from traveling through time.

And then it came, lightning stabbing the towering tree behind me, and so close that I could feel the energy blasting through its root system and into the soles of my shoes, throwing me up and away into another tree. Dazed, I lay there for a long moment under the spruce, hearing nothing except the roaring in my head.

I sat up, rubbing my forehead and looking at the fire as it crackled through the fir's branches to neighboring trees. That's when I caught the familiar shimmer in the air as another Sam Nelson dropped into existence. He looked about fifty, much older than the Sam that Lee and I had seen outside my house. Dressed in a supple Nomex approach suit, boots, and hardhat, he trained the video camera he carried on the trunk of the burning tree, tracking up, across, and down to spot me in his viewfinder. He

peered around the side of the camera, as if unsure if I was really there. Lowering it, he walked to where I stood and led me farther from the fire.

"Sam? What's going on?" he asked. "Aren't you a bit young to be fighting fires?"

I was glad my ears had cleared enough to hear him. "Wild twist. It was an accident."

"Aren't they all?" He hooked a thumb over his shoulder at the fire.

"Where am I? And when?"

"You can't tell? Come on, what kind of trees do you see?"

"Fir." I nodded toward the burning tree. "Spruce."

"Grand fir," he corrected. "Sitka spruce. And over there is a yellow cedar. And there's a black hawthorn behind you. It's August 10, 1034."

"British Columbia, then," I said, looking down toward my tennis shoes. When the hell had I gotten so superior and condescending? "When are the rest of the Sams coming?"

"Coming?"

"To fight the fire." I imagined them, Sams of all ages arriving with axes and heavy-duty extinguishers. I was surprised they weren't here already; we tried to catch fires as early as possible.

"We're not fighting this one. It's necessary for the environment. Cleans out the understory." He turned back to the spreading fire. "I'm just studying it." He started to raise the camera again, then paused. "Is that yours?"

"What?" And then I saw the small nude figure staring raptly up at the fiery rain of needles and cones all around. I ran to the kid and pulled him away. Older Sam was ignoring both of us, so I closed my eyes, concentrating on a certain place and time, and

twisted

—Newport Beach. A two-bedroom house. Mine, but unfurnished and new, suffused with the smell of fresh paint. I could feel the boy trying to direct the twist, to send us once more into flame. I grabbed a doorframe and yelled "Stop!" Something worked; maybe he was just too tired. We were both covered in abrasions, and I felt fresh blood on my cheek. I'd been wrenching in every direction. So had he. The boy held up his right hand and screamed; the index finger was gone, down to the second knuckle.

"I'll take care of that," said a voice, and the old man stepped through from the kitchen.

"Gramps."

His face and neck were covered in masses of scar tissue, his left sleeve was pinned up, he walked with a cane. He limped over to the boy. "Sam. Hello there."

I'd heard that voice, saying that name to me, so many times. Tears pricked at my eyes. Gramps had taught me English, had shown me how to read—hell, he'd named me. First the fires, then the old man. My earliest memories.

I had to get away for a minute. I walked upstairs to the front bedroom and grabbed the first shirt I saw. Most of them were still in plastic. When I got back to the kitchen with it, Gramps had the kid seated at the table and was clumsily bandaging him. I draped the shirt around the kid's

shoulders while staring at his damaged hand. Then I looked at my own—complete—hand.

Gramps—the oldest Sam—had a different pair of fingers missing on his remaining hand. Time is just the most amazing thing.

He finished with the kid and pulled down a loaf of bread. Sam tore into it like he hadn't eaten in days. I took a slice, too.

Gramps picked up the ointment again and looked at me. "Your cheek is bleeding."

I put a finger to my cheek, looked at it. "Not much," I said, holding up my hand to ward him off. He started for me anyway, and I backed up a couple of steps. That stopped him.

"I'm dead, aren't I?" he said.

"Yeah. Three years ago, my time."

He looked me up and down. "Looks like I've got about a decade, then."

"If—" I said.

"Yes, I wish it were that easy. No, strike that, I don't."

Neither did I. Then what we did, all we Sams, would be useless.

Gramps smiled. "At least you're not staring at my feet anymore. Nice to see your face."

I looked at him and he at me, and the kid chewed and looked at both of us. I broke the staring contest first. "Well, gotta go."

"I've got him," said Gramps, laying his hand on the kid's—on Sam's—shoulder.

"Goodbye, Sam," I said to both of them. I twisted on out of there.

I turned on the television and got the date and time from the cable directory channel. It was early afternoon, two days after I'd left Lee upstairs.

I checked, just to make sure. He wasn't up there.

I pulled off my bloody, torn, and abraded clothes and threw them away. Then I took a shower and treated the worst scrapes. I looked—and felt—like I'd been dragged behind a car. Getting dressed again, I noticed Lee's keys on the dresser.

The drive to the hospital was a memorable one, considering that Gramps had only given me a couple of lessons before he'd died.

Lee was out of intensive care, the nurse at the desk told me. She was polite, but adamant that the details of his illness not be discussed with anybody but family. But yes, I could see him.

He was sitting up in the darkened room, alone with the beep of the heart monitor. "Hey, Sam." His expression was blank, like he wanted to see which way I'd jump before committing himself.

"Hi, Lee. I'm sorry to hear about your dad."

"Yeah, well. It's not like he was ever around." He was fooling with the cord that ran from his finger to the monitor.

"So how'd you get to the hospital?"

"That guy, the one who was knocking on the door? He was the same one we saw earlier. His raincoat was still dripping. Water and blood both. Weird." The monitor started beeping a little faster. "He looked just like you, only older."

"He was me."

I told him. About me and being found by me when I was five. Or apparently five—older mes have been looking in the past, especially around fires, but haven't found a me younger than the Sam I'd rescued. I told him about being raised by Gramps. And then I told him about my mission in life, and he broke up.

"Oh, that is excellent," he said. "You, a fireman! All by yourself?"

"Yeah," I said. "Except when I put a fire out, it stays out. You heard about the Kyoto Inferno? Five years ago?"

He shook his head.

"The Los Angeles firebomber? In 1980? Apollo 11?"

He was still shaking his head. "Didn't that one go to the moon?"

"Now it did. I have as much choice about what I do in the past as you do about what you're going to do tomorrow."

"Color me freaked," he said, but the heart monitor had slowed back down. He looked toward the door, and I turned my head to see that there were shadows on its pebbled glass. The handle turned, and a nurse walked in, followed by a Chinese woman.

"Màmà," said Lee. He and the woman, his mother, talked together in Chinese.

The nurse turned to me. "Excuse me, dear. I think you'd better go."

Lee held up his hand. "Could he stay? Please?"

"Well—" said the nurse, but Lee and his mother had already gone back to their conversation. Tears were streaming down both their faces.

The nurse dithered, then left, and, after a while, Lee introduced his mother to me. We held an awkward conversation, translated through Lee, which broke off when a woman doctor came through the door, accompanied by a young Chinese man.

"I'm Doctor Meade," she said. "And this is Lawrence Fong, a graduate student from the University of California. He'll be translating for me."

"I can do that," said Lee.

"Some of the medical terms are pretty complicated. I want to make sure your mother understands your condition completely."

Lee had something called Systemic Lupus Erythematosus. "Or SLE," said the doctor. "It's more common in women than in men, but it's also more prevalent in people from China. There are eleven warning signs, and Lee has four of them, including fatigue, the facial rash, and loss of hair. That's more than enough to make a fair diagnosis." She talked about an immunosuppressive regimen, and said the chances of his surviving were very good. "Eighty percent of people with lupus live past ten more years," she said, like that was a good thing.

Lee's mother shook her head. "He must come back with me for treatment in China," Fong translated. "She doesn't trust western medicine."

"He would be better off here," said the doctor. "He's likely to die of an intercurrent infection."

Lee's mother was adamant. Finally, in obvious frustration, the doctor agreed to sign Lee out. They all left.

"If the doctor were a man," said Lee, "he might have talked her into it."

I didn't know how much time I had. "The doctor said that if you go back to China, you'll die."

Without a pause, he said, "Then I'm not going."

"She'll make you."

"Not if I'm not here." He pulled the sheet away and yanked the lead off his finger. Immediately, an alarm went off on the monitoring unit. "Crap," he said, trying to get to his feet. He coughed. Coughed again.

Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh specializes in lupus. I figured, as long as I was twisting, that we might as well do a little research and get him into the best institution. So first we went to the library, a few years up the line, to see who'd had recent breakthroughs in the disorder, and then I took him to Pennsylvania.

I got him there a couple of months before we left the hospital in California. You wouldn't even know about the bar fire there unless you were local, but it helped pull us to the area. I made sure to get him a male doctor. Then I jumped to six months later and met his mother again for her first time.

When he was well, he asked me to take him back to before his father's accident. He thinks he can stop it.

I said I'd consider it. Maybe I'll take him. If it works, I'll get introduced to his mom for the first time again—as well as his dad.

Twisting back home, I went through the ritual of undressing, showering, bandaging, and dressing. I was on my way to check the date and time when there was a knock at the door. I ignored it, finding out I had arrived a week after Lee had gone into the local hospital.

The doorbell rang.

Tired and sore and twisted all to hell, I couldn't think of any reason not to answer the door. Twisting away from the USCIS and the end of high school would be a pleasure.

"Hello, Samuel," she said.

"Agent Carter," I said.

"This is Maralee Consualves of Child Protective Services. I called her as a concerned citizen. May we come in?"

How far could I string them along? "I don't know," I said. "My father is asleep upstairs. Please come back later." I bet myself that Carter had very sensible black pumps, and that the hightops Consualves wore were a riot of color. But I didn't look. I'd stopped looking down.

"I fear we really must have this conversation now," Consualves said. "We have been trying to contact you for several days."

So I let them in. They preceded me into the den, looking around at the photos of various Sams at various ages on the mantel, then at the inexpensive furniture, the television, and, through the door, into the kitchen. I saw Carter point out the stairs to the other woman.

They sat on the couch. I took Gramps's recliner.

"Now, Samuel," said Carter. "Your school has had no contact with your parents or a guardian in several years. Your grades have been good, so they haven't felt any need to call someone in. But now, you've been skipping school for a week." She grinned, obviously convinced she'd caught me, another parachute kid, just like Lee.

Consualves took over. "You seem quite mature. But it is my job to ensure that no minor is in danger or without the help he or she needs. I will ask you right out: do you have someone to watch over you?"

I opened my mouth.

"Of course he does."

I turned to the stairs, as surprised as the two women. An older me stood on the bottom step, removing his wet raincoat. He dropped it, and advanced on Carter and Consualves. "I am his father: Samuel Nelson, Senior. His mother is sadly gone. Has Sam done something to precipitate this meeting?"

"I fear he has been missing school lately," said Consualves. "It worries us when there is no reason given."

He shot me a reproving glance, so I tried to look contrite. "We will discuss it, he and I. But—isn't that something for me to take up with the school? Not you?"

"Actually—it is." Consualves got to her feet, followed several seconds later by Carter. "There has been no official complaint. We won't keep you any longer. Come along, Margaret." The tone of that last line said plain as day that Carter had run out of favors at Child Protective Services.

Margaret went along. She paused next to me, looked in suspicious bafflement at the wet raincoat on the floor, and went on to the door. Once there, she turned. "One last thing, Samuel. Have you seen Lee Tsien Chen?"

"Not recently, no."

"The police are looking for him," she said. "And so is the USCIS, for deportation. You seem to have been the last person to see him. I'll make sure they've got your address." She left.

I was right about their shoes.

Dinner was quiet, just the five of us. All Sams, of course; even Gramps and the kid—maybe three years older, maybe four—twisted here. They want me to go back to school. "Back" as in back a week, to make up the lost time. After graduation, they'd like me to apply to the Massachusetts Firefighting Academy. I said that my application had to be in nine months ago for consideration.

We all laughed. That was the easy part. ○

SOMEWHERE IN THE MOEBIUS' HOUSE

Somewhere in the Moebius' house,
a most theoretical louse
bit a linear cat,
while a dog—very flat—
chased a monodimensional mouse!

—W. Gregory Stewart

POLYHEDRONS

Robert A. Metzger

Robert Metzger's hard-SF novel *Picoverse* was a 2003 Nebula finalist, and Ace has just released his latest novel, *CUSP*. Mr. Metzger's short fiction has appeared in *Science Fiction Age*, *F&SF*, *Amazing*, *Weird Tales*, and *Aboriginal SF*, and his non-fiction science pieces in *Analog*, *Wired*, and in his long running science column in the *Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America Bulletin*. When not writing, Dr. Metzger dusts off his Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering and attempts to beat obnoxious atoms into submission while growing semiconductor thin films by a process called Molecular Beam Epitaxy. You can learn more about his various activities at www.rametzger.com. The following tale is his first story for *Asimov's*.

Turning my back to the Edge and squatting down, I placed a fingertip to the hot asphalt; a slightly sticky sheen of liquid tar glistened, its sour scent blossoming around me. Three forms of input—touch, sight, and smell. The asphalt made no sound, and while I could bend down and take a lick, there was not much point. I'd already identified the substance, and a few more feeble forms of detection would not allow me to alter that reality. The asphalt was beyond my ability to control. The place of infinite possibilities lay on the other side of the Edge; now forever beyond my reach.

I'd been exiled, purged, drained of almost all abilities and memories.

Knocking aside a few rocks and pebbles, I picked up a wayward polyhedron. Black and twenty-two-sided, it was blissfully unaware of having tunneled through the Edge; its nearly infinite number of quantum states collapsed, this snip of geometry was now only defined by a four-dimensional location vector, facet dimensions, and a few color and texture designators. Closing my hand, I felt the polyhedron's hard edges bite into my skin, but still, I could not bend it to my will.

Useless.

Opening my fist, I tossed the polyhedron over my shoulder and in the direction of the Edge, just as a distant and desiccated memory resurfaced. Mills Avenue should be cutting north-south, instead of the mist of polyhedrons spilling into the sky. I took a few steps, my right ankle momen-

tarily throbbing; a phantom twinge that vanished the instant I considered it. At that moment, I knew there was nothing wrong with my ankle, despite the fading memory of its being carbonized by a high voltage arc.

Then the memory vanished, swallowing its own tail.

I looked down.

A few other polyhedrons had tumbled in from the Edge of the world, much smaller than the one I had tossed. These resembled small grains of black sugar and sparkling chips of obsidian. Not worth considering. I shifted my attention to the cuffs of my jeans, my gray knit socks, and a pair of sweat-streaked sneakers. Not PF Flyers, the shoes that would have allowed me to run faster, jump higher, and sculpt the froth of space-time, but just an old pair of Keds with frayed laces. Also not worth considering. So I started to walk. I knew my destination—the pinkish stucco, three-bedroom, two-bath ranch, with the shake roof in need of repair, and the sheared sprinkler head by the curb that spewed like a little liquid volcano. Not far away in the overall scheme of things, probably no more than a dozen houses down the street, but still halfway to the far Edge of this world.

I'd walked down this street before.

Many times.

I shook my head, sensing a few snips of entangled thoughts tunneling through the Edge, quantum fields sampling the reality beyond. And, for just a moment, I remembered. This street was not the world, but an annex *between* worlds. Then the thought was gone, just another quantum phantom extinguished in the harsh light of examination.

I focused on the street—on Aurora Drive, looking down the stretch of asphalt that should have ended at a barbed wire fence intended to keep kids out of the expanse of brown weeds and prickly pear cactus beyond it. But, like Mills Avenue, a polyhedron mist defined the not-so-distant boundary.

I lowered my head, letting the summer sun beat at my neck, watched my Keds kicking at pebbles, and walked past the doorless and windowless houses, moving toward the cloud-white 1960 Dodge Dart sitting in the driveway of the pink stucco, three-bedroom, two-bathroom, ranch style house—the only car anywhere on Aurora Drive. The Dart's chrome sparkled in the summer sun, its rear fins an impressive bit of geometry adorned with red and white bubbles of plastic, perfect in form, if not quite in function. Only the swatch of electrical tape running across the top of the right fin, holding a band of chrome against the red taillight, marred the original design. A retaining screw was missing.

I stopped and touched the Dart, running a finger along the rear fin, dragging it across the white enamel, and then onto the gooey strand of sun-faded gray electrical tape. *Why hadn't the owners fixed it*, I wondered once again?

It was not so much a question of how to keep a taillight in place.

It was a question of returning the Dart to a state of pristine perfection.

Static perfection, a time invariant example of what should be. When faced with infinite possibilities, quantum states beyond the ability to count, static perfection was the only possible alternative, the only way to maintain sanity.

Shaking my head, unable to understand how something so obviously in need of fixing had not been fixed, I walked onto the expanse of pea gravel that ran along the side of the house, and then through an open gate leading into the backyard.

Soothing order.

Defined by a redwood stained fence, the backyard consisted of a one-fifth acre geometrical quilt with patches of brown grass, more pea gravel, a slab of concrete beneath a gray-stained aluminum sheet patio, and the dominating rock garden—a mound of stones, worn and rounded, better than waist high. Everything in its place and a place for everything—static perfection.

I frowned.

There was one exception.

I walked to the far corner of the yard, a microscopic wilderness created by several pine trees nearly thirty or forty feet high, the canopy reaching into the spider web of phone and power lines criss crossing over the yard. Oleander bushes, sprouting flame-red buds, clustered in chaotic clumps from the base of the pines, defined the boundary of a small clearing.

Chaotic.

But at least shaded.

And in the shade, beneath the canopy of pines, Bobby stood in the hole. Knee-deep, with trowel in hand, a rusted metal thing with a paint-splattered wooden handle, he bent down, poking at something I could not see, and flicked out a bit of dark dirt, a brown arc flying above his head, little of it actually falling outside of the hole.

There looked to be little progress from yesterday, perhaps none at all.

The ground here was incredibly hard and rocky, and the little trowel he used was totally inadequate for the task he'd set for himself. I walked into the shade of the trees and took my seat in the rickety wooden chair waiting there, its slats once stained red like the surrounding fence, but now faded dirt-brown by years of summer sun, its wooden surface splintered and dimpled with rusted nail heads. I picked up the bottle of Orange Crush that always waited for me, popped the cap using the old pliers resting on the arm of the chair, and let the cap fly.

I drank, long and deep.

Cold. It was *always* cold—a bit of certainty in a constantly shifting reality. But my mind seemed to begrudge me that comforting snip of immutability, and I found myself wondering if the Orange Crush should be something *more* than just cold, sensing something missing, something forgotten—a mental itch that couldn't be scratched. As I considered that, I watched a thick clot of gnats swarm above Bobby's head, suspecting they pestered him in a similar, not quite conscious manner, his free hand occasionally swatting at them, the clot momentarily scattering, but then reforming the instant his hand passed through them. They were attracted to the Butch-Wax that kept his bangs standing at attention, the pink paste glistening in his short brown hair.

I rested the pop bottle on the arm of my chair, placing it with care next to the pliers. "Find anything?"

Bobby straightened up, turning, running the back of his hand across

his sweaty face, leaving behind a dirt streak from right cheek to forehead. Dropping his trowel and reaching over to an adjacent pile of dirt and rocks, he fished out a shard of granite, dark, but flecked white. "A fossil," he said as he held the rock out in my direction. "Probably from a T-Rex."

I shook my head. "A piece of granite."

Bobby frowned, his round face puckering, his eyes half-closing, the freckles across the bridge of his nose and cheeks momentarily sizzling in pattern, flashing crystalline lattices, folded proteins, Feynman diagrams, even tachyon decay tracks, the patterns generated by a nearly infinite number of pulsing gold line segments, the ends of each anchored by a freckle—the images *too* fluid. "Still might be a fossil," he said, his freckles again only freckles.

I shook my head once more. "A piece of granite."

He squinted at me, and then tossed the rock back into the pile. "Doesn't matter," he said, and, squatting down, poked at the bottom of his hole with the trowel. "Could be *anything* down here. Might even be another world beyond the bottom of that hole."

It was now my turn to squint, and for my face to pucker. *Anything* was synonymous with an intrinsic lack of control. "Just dirt and rocks," I said. Then I thought for a moment, searching far, attempting to reach out for the boy and his strange way of thinking, to meet him at a point somewhere along the distant line separating us. "Perhaps a cat might have used your hole for a litter box. That would offer up something other than dirt and rocks."

Bobby straightened up, and pointed the trowel's rusted tip at me. "Very good," he said. "Never thought about cat poop. Might even be *ancient* cat poop, possibly even *fossilized* cat poop, left here by a cat that had the poop scared right out of it as it was chased by a T-Rex."

This time I didn't even bother to shake my head. "Of course, cats and T-Rex did not exist at the same geological moment."

"*Geological moment*," he said, imitating me in a flat, emotionless voice. "You can't know for *certain*. The cat might have been caught in the negative energy density that formed between two counter-rotating micro-black holes just moments before they leaked away the last of their mass in a Hawking burst. You'd get quite the temporal compression during a burst like that, easily capable of hurling a cat millions of years into the past." He stared at me, while reaching down and pulling his belt up over his very ample waist. "Could have happened."

"Such a phenomenon could only take place in the vacuum of space, in an environment hardly conducive to the well-being of a cat. And, of course, if you consider the local gravitational shear in the vicinity of the holes, not to mention the hard gamma backflow erupting from the too-near event horizons, a cat simply couldn't survive in order to take advantage of the temporal burst."

Bobby smiled. "Rad-hardened, graviometric-compensated, cat space-suit," he said, and then bent back down and began poking at rocks. "The cat poop was good, real out-of-the-box thinking for someone who has lived an eternity in a box."

I said nothing, realizing that this was a pointless discussion; that when it came to what was possible and what was impossible, Bobby was incapable of seeing the difference, undoubtedly an artifact of being trapped in a world he could not control.

"But I don't really care about fossilized, time-traveling cat poop," said Bobby, tossing aside his trowel, and then bending down into the hole and grunting, sweat pooling in the creases dimpling along the back of his neck. "Umph," he said, lurching forward, almost falling on his face, but catching himself at the last moment, then reaching down to his feet again and hoisting up a dirt-encrusted rock shaped like a too-large sweet potato. He tossed it into the pile. "I'm just digging a hole."

"Why?" I asked, knowing I had asked countless times before, but not quite able to remember the answer.

Bobby sat down on the lip of the hole, his feet just brushing the bottom. I looked down into the hole for a moment, not at the dirt and rocks, but at his shoes, an old pair of Keds, and then at his gray socks and at the cuffs of his jeans. "I'm going to dig right down to the bottom of the world, *through* the bottom of the world, and get off of Aurora Drive," he said.

I smiled as I remembered.

Always the same answer.

Aurora Drive *was* his world. There was nothing beyond it for him, past the infinite walls of polyhedrons, and certainly nothing below it. I picked up my Orange Crush and finished it off. When I lowered the bottle, Bobby was gone—the hole empty, nothing but rocks and dirt and the footprints left from a pair of Keds. Looking into the hole, I wondered just what Bobby believed lay on the other side. I stood and left, knowing that I'd see him tomorrow.

I always saw him tomorrow.

Even hotter than yesterday. I stood before the Dart.

The car listed to the left, its rear end lowered. I squinted, seeing what had happened, but not wanting to believe it. Instead, I tried to focus my attention on the strip of electrical tape, on that familiar, and so easily correctible defect.

But I couldn't.

The car sat at an impossible angle, its tailpipe pinched between the rear bumper and driveway, actually cracked, *permanently* damaged. I slowly walked around the back of the car, bending down, running my hands across its trunk.

The left rear wheel was gone, not just the tire, but the *entire* wheel, nothing there but a ragged stub of the axle, leaking dark fluid and digging into the asphalt driveway. If Bobby's parents could not replace the screw on a taillight, I knew they could never make this repair.

Beyond repair.

I walked past the car, moving fast, my Keds kicking at the pea gravel. "Bobby!" I shouted. As I cleared the gate, I saw him standing nearly waist deep in his hole, the pile of rocks and dirt beyond the hole's rim, almost as high as his head. "Did you see what happened to the Dart? It's beyond repair!"

Bobby straightened up, and leaning forward, rested against the lip of the hole. "So?"

"It's broken, damaged, obviously in need of major repair. It is not *operational*."

Bobby motioned with his trowel, pointing at me and then at the chair. "Have a seat, relax, and carefully consider just what it is that really needs to be repaired."

I took a deep breath, and, bending down, grabbed onto the arms of the chair, steadyng myself, slowly sitting, and willing myself to focus, to prioritize, and to question my assumptions and objectives. "The car is broken. Items that are broken need to be repaired. Therefore, the car needs to be repaired. It needs to be returned to a state that is invariant with respect to the local temporal flow. Pristine and static."

"You need a *Crush*," said Bobby, pointing at the bottle next to the chair.

He folded his pudgy, dirt-caked arms across his chest, obviously waiting, so patient. There was no way around it. I reached down, grabbed the bottle, popping the cap with the pliers, and took a fast drink, the spot between my eyes suddenly pounding. I lowered the bottle into my lap. It was at that moment that I understand why *Orange Crush* was called *Orange Crush*.

Something remembered?

"If the car were repaired, what would you do with it?" he asked.

I had difficulty focusing on his question, still overloaded by the taste of *orange* in my mouth.

"There is nowhere it can take you, no way that the car can be used to escape Aurora Drive. The car serves no purpose here. It is a distraction, masquerading as a problem. When you have only a finite amount of time, you must focus on the real problems, learn to prioritize." He pointed his trowel toward the west, through a small break in the trees, where the polyhedron mist was visible. "We don't have the resources on this side of the Edge to create the static perfection that you crave."

I blinked, and then took another sip, this time slow and easy, savoring the *orangeness*. "But the *Dart* is damaged."

"Certainly is," said Bobby, "and I suspect that tomorrow, it will be even more so."

I grimaced.

"The real problem, what you will help me with, has nothing to do with that old *Dart*, but it is in getting to the bottom of this hole, since that is the only way *we* can get off of Aurora Drive."

I looked past him, and into the hole. Still nothing but dirt and rocks. "It's just a hole."

He shook his head. "It is the solution to your problem."

The only problem I had was the 1960 Dodge *Dart*, and its missing wheel and right rear taillight retaining screw. But I found I couldn't quite tell him that. "I don't have a trowel," I said, instead making an excuse, looking past him and into the hole.

Bobby smiled. "You have something better than a trowel."

I couldn't imagine what that might be.

"In your left pants pocket," he said, pointing the trowel at my pants.

That made absolutely no sense. My jeans *had* no pockets, since there was nothing I had that required a pocket. I looked down. My jeans now had pockets. Reaching in, I felt something hard and cold, frigid, my fingertips tingling and at the same time burning. I slowly pulled the object out of my pocket, tendrils of vapor first snaking out, followed by what appeared to be sputtering and hissing blobs of liquefied air, quickly boiling away to nothing. With a final tug, the object was out of my pocket, stuck to my fingertips, a small sphere of crackling *something*, so cold that the air around it liquefied, dribbling down, splashing to the ground where it crackled and danced. The orb was beyond frigid, the joints in my fingers stiffening, and the skin on my fingertips cracking.

"A 256-qubit Bose-Einstein quantum computer, self-contained in a solid hydrogen shell, containing a laser-suspended lithium ion condensate matrix chilled to 3 degrees microkelvin," said Bobby, pointing at the sphere. "The ultimate quantum computer, with enough aggregate degrees of freedom to describe *every* possible initial condition of the problem at hand, and then process that information simultaneously through its entangled states beyond the Edge, and back to the primary processor where you've stored your soul."

I nodded, and released the frozen sphere, the tips of my fingers cracking off, falling into Bobby's hole. There was no pain, my hand frozen solid up to the wrist. The sphere hung in front of me, spitting liquefied air and chilling my nose.

"Just imagine if you had one of those locked in the old noggin!" said Bobby, as he tapped the side of his head with his trowel, and then climbed up the side of the hole, kicking back in a fair amount of dirt and rocks in the process. "There are an infinite number of paths to get from here to there," he said, pointing at himself, and then at the bottom of the hole. "But only *one* path will show just *which* rock to remove first, what trowel full of dirt to remove *next*, and then which rock should go after that in order to get *through* the bottom. If you don't do it in just the right order, the hole will always fall in on itself, the rocks tumbling back, the dirt filling in."

"Not easy," I said.

Bobby nodded. "It would take you more than forever trying it this way or that, slogging along for eternity in an old digital bit-by-bit fashion. But you don't have an infinite amount of time." Reaching up, he wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. "Gets hotter every day, not many more days left before the entangled states lose coherence and you dribble away." He pointed his trowel in the direction of the polyhedron mist, just visible through the break in the trees. "What you need to do is implement all the solutions *simultaneously*, and then pick out the one that actually *works*. A perfect job for your quantum computer, where those old yes and no digital bits are replaced by quantum bits of infinite possibilities. One run of the problem, and *all* the solutions pop out simultaneously. That would get us down to the bottom of the hole in a hurry."

I nodded my head and looked into the hole. So many rocks, and so much dirt, nothing clear, nothing definite, each step a probability, a possibility, the uncertainty amplified with each movement taken. But the frozen sphere could cut through all the uncertainty.

Static perfection.

"The solution becomes obvious, and you've arrived at that static state you are so comfortable with," said Bobby as he pointed at the frozen sphere. "It can solve *any* problem, but not *all* problems—there's not enough time. The trick is not in the solving, but in the asking—which problem should be solved?"

I squinted, not understanding.

He stepped over to me, staring straight into my eyes. He was exactly my height. It was only at that moment that I realized I was a child, as tall as Bobby, and probably just as old. We wore the same Keds, the same gray socks, and the same cuffed jeans.

"The real problem is in choosing the right problem," said Bobby, and, reaching out, grabbed me by my broken, frozen hand, pulled me forward, and then pushed me toward the hole. I fell, a wall of dirt and rock streaking past me for a time that seemed impossibly long, either the hole or my perception of it distorting. "It's why I'm here," he said. "To teach you how to identify *that* problem."

I hit hard, flat on my back, rocks cracking ribs, shattering my spine, caving in the back of my skull. Bobby was far above me, barely visible, peering in from the edge of a small circle of light—the top of the hole.

"Choose the *right* problem!"

He threw down something so small that I couldn't quite see it, something that trailed long wispy tendrils—the frozen sphere.

"No!"

"Start digging!" he shouted.

I tried to move, but my body was broken, my bones shattered. The sphere came for me, straight at my head, aimed right between my eyes. It hit, blistering skin, vaporizing bone, burrowing deeply into my brain.

The day ended.

Bones no longer broken, missing fingers replaced—trivial concerns in comparison to what lay nestled in my head. The air burned my throat, searing my eyes. Each time I blinked, I could hear the inside of my lids scraping against dried corneas. My right ankle throbbed, the narrow wedge of skin visible between fallen-down sock and pant leg, all pink and puffy, blistered in spots, even flecked here and there with what I assumed to be charred skin.

Simply too hot.

The only cool spot was deep within my head, several centimeters behind my eyes, where the frozen shard was lodged, the 256-qubit quantum processor—a nasty thing, distracting, so intent on solving problems—any problems.

Only a portion of the 1960 Dodge Dart sat in the driveway, the rest strewn across the lawn, the oil filter crushed beneath the engine block, valve lifters neatly stacked, a shallow pool of transmission fluid seeping into the brown grass. The carburetor here, the radiator missing its hoses over there, a pile of glistening shards that must have been the pulverized back window sitting by the leaking sprinkler head.

Thousands of parts strewn about.

I smiled, because I could see them *all*, pattern and order where none should exist. I could sense the intent, the way to put it all back together, and the most efficient method to reassemble the rear window one small shard of glass at a time.

Each step so clear . . .

I almost started, at that moment feeling so good, so confident, the objective so clear, my abilities more than adequate for the task at hand. And then I frowned. The right rear wheel was still missing. I looked across the lawn, desperately checking. The screw needed to hold the chrome banding around the right rear taillight was also still missing.

Despite my abilities, what the entangled qubits in my head allowed me to see, it was still not enough. The Dart *could not* be returned to a state of static perfection, regardless of what I could do, what I could see.

No point in starting such a task.

So I walked up the driveway, past the gravel, and through the back gate. Bobby stood chest-deep in his hole. Next to him was the chair, and on the arm of the chair an unopened bottle of Orange Crush. Beyond the chair was a second hole, again with Bobby standing chest-deep in it, and next to it another chair and an unopened bottle of Orange Crush. And beyond that chair still another hole.

And another.

And another.

The backyard had taken on a decidedly non-Euclidian geometry. An infinite line of holes, Bobbys, chairs, and bottles of Orange Crush ran to the horizon, one that didn't have the decency to fade into the haze. It simply went on forever. And I could see all of it.

"A large number of holes," said the first Bobby in the first hole.

I nodded.

"Yet one is significantly different from all the rest," he said.

I walked over to the second hole, looking into it and at the Bobby standing there. It took only a moment for me to study the second hole, the 256-qubit quantum processor embedded in my head was quite efficient. I quickly compared the position and shape of each rock, each pebble, and each speck of dirt in the two holes, also taking into account the exact position and dimensions of the two Bobbys. There was no difference. They were identical.

I was about to walk to the third hole, but realized that since the backyard was no longer in the realm of Euclidian Geometry, there was no reason that I should limit myself to operating in a world of Euclidian Geometry. The quantum computer in my head allowed me to examine all the holes.

Simultaneously.

I took one step forward.

My peripheral vision slightly blurred, my right foot not quite finding the ground, as I took a slightly longer step than anticipated, and suddenly found myself standing next to *all* the holes, looking down and examining each and every Bobby.

I stepped back, reintegrating.

"Identical," I said as I walked back to the first hole and sat in the chair.

"There is no hole better than the others, no hole that will lead you out of Aurora Drive."

"Not so," said the first Bobby.

"There is absolutely no difference between any of these holes, and absolutely no difference between each and every one of you," I said.

"So, you include me as part of the hole," he said, smiling. "The hole is more than just an opening in the ground, but also includes me—a rather bold assertion and some first class thinking *outside the hole*." Still smiling, he looked to his left, in the direction of the infinite line of holes and Bobbys. "And, using that logic, one might assume that each hole includes a chair, a bottle of Orange Crush, and a pliers."

I looked down the infinite line.

"A hole is clearly a hole," I said. "And you being inside the hole become an obvious intrinsic aspect of the hole." I paused at that point.

"Confusion is a good thing," said Bobby, looking up at me. "You're not quite sure about the chair and the Orange Crush. Might they actually be a part of the hole? Is there more to a hole than an opening in the ground and a boy standing in it?"

I blinked once, then again. "Whether the chair and Orange Crush are included makes no real difference—neither change the nature of the hole."

"Really?" asked Bobby.

I nodded and looked down the infinite line.

"Have a seat and take a drink," said Bobby.

I sat, picked up the Orange Crush and the pliers, popped the cap and took a sip.

"Still see no difference?" he asked.

I looked again, just to humor him. There were an infinite number of holes, an infinite number of chairs, an infinite number of bottles of Orange Crush, and an infinite number of Bobbys looking up questioningly at me.

"All the same," I said.

Then Bobby suddenly moved, not *all* of them in perfect synch, but only the one nearest me. He jumped out of the hole far faster than any chubby little boy should be able to, and, reaching out, grabbed onto my hand. "What about *you*!" He pulled me up out of the chair and toward the hole.

I dropped my Orange Crush, the bottle shattering on a rock.

"*You* are only at the first hole," he said. "Only *you* sat in the first chair." He pointed down at the broken bottle and the little pool of orange soda around it. "And only *you* drank that Orange Crush and broke that bottle." He pulled me close.

"The first hole is different because *you* are a part of it!"

I shook my head, and tried to pull away, but Bobby had a tight hold on my wrist, a hold so tight that his plump little fingers seemed to be melting right into my skin, his fingers flowing into me.

"You're a part of this," he said. "An integral, critical component."

Again, I shook my head. Bobby still had a hold on me, but his hand was now missing. We were welded together at the right wrist, sharing a single

hand. He pulled me forward, jumping down into the hole, dragging me in with him.

"We need to dig," he said.

I didn't want to dig. I knew there was no point to it—like the Dart that couldn't be returned to a state of static perfection. You could not dig your way out of Aurora Drive.

"Which rock first, which one is the key?" he asked.

I don't tell him, since I wanted no part of this hole-digging business.

But I knew the answer, could see it so clearly. There were only a finite number of rocks along the sides and bottom of the hole, only so many ways to remove them, so many possibilities—certainly a large number, but a finite number. The quantum processor in my head showed me the possibilities, and showed me which rock should be removed first.

I had no intention of touching that rock.

But my hand moved toward it, the hand that I shared with Bobby. "This is the problem to be solved," he said. "It is not about rebuilding a car that can never be rebuilt. Choosing the correct problem is the key."

I touched the rock.

Then I screamed and pulled back, the hand tearing away from my wrist, a chunk of white bone and red meat dangling from the torn nub. I screamed again, and then fainted.

The sky above seemed to be nothing except a searing ball of heat, no clouds, no expanse of blue, nothing but an all-pervasive canopy of blinding light. I reached up to wipe the sweat from my face, but Bobby had now taken both hands. With the stump of my wrist, I pushed some of the sweat out of my eyes.

The Dart had further disintegrated, not a single discrete item recognizable as a car part, each individual part having been broken down into the most fundamental constituents, a rusting pile of steel shavings by the fire hydrant, a mound of minced plastic next to it, and a solid sphere of glass about the size of my head, formed from what had been all the shards from the Dart's shattered windows, just a few feet in front of me. And it went on from there to ever smaller piles, cobalt and titanium from the paint, minced shards of asbestos from the brake pads, neatly rolled fibers from the cloth seat covers, and even a thimble full of cigar ashes from the ashtray.

But the right rear wheel, along the right rear chrome retaining screw, were still missing. I sighed, realizing that I no longer cared. Even if the missing wheel and retaining screw were to magically appear, if I could pull them from some higher dimensional entangled vortex, I was not sure that I would have even bothered to rebuild the car. Because I'd come to realize that Bobby was right. There was no need for a car on Aurora Drive, not when this single street was the entire world—a smoldering, melting world that would soon be engulfed in flame, a dying place that did not need a perfect 1960 Dodge Dart.

I walked through the back gate, trudging along. I could see the hole, only one today, the non-Euclidian space having collapsed, and next to the hole was the chair and the bottle of Orange Crush. I could not see Bobby,

but a few pebbles flew out of the hole, landing atop the colossal mound of dirt next to it.

I limped forward.

My right ankle was swollen and dripping a cloudy liquid. In one spot, a nub of bone poked through a ruptured blister. I did my best to ignore the pain, and focused on the hole. Bobby was down there, his butch-waxed hair shimmering nearly three feet beneath the lip of the hole. He'd been working hard, with my hands attached to his wrists, grabbing at this rock and that, the hands seeming to almost know what to do, which rock should go next. My hands were pretty savvy in the ways of hole-digging, still tied into that 256-qubit processor in my head, despite the fact that my hands were attached to Bobby—this thanks to some quantum voodoo by way of entangled states between my missing hands and me.

I could actually feel the rocks, almost cool, the dirt coating them damp, the texture gritty. I sat back in the chair, thankful to be taking the weight off of my rotting ankle, and, sliding back, looked over at the bottle of Orange Crush. Reaching for the bottle, I almost knocked it over with the nub of my left wrist. "I'm thirsty!" I called out to Bobby.

"Care to make a trade?" he asked.

Suspicious, I was afraid to answer, but so thirsty. "What have you got in mind?"

"I'll give you a right hand for a right eyeball. You'll be able to get that bottle of Orange Crush open, and I'll have a direct optical input to your quantum processor. That should really speed up the digging. Your hands have been most helpful, but they can't quite see what they're doing."

I thought about it for a moment, and then shrugged, realizing that it actually sounded like a reasonable trade. With one hand I could open the bottle of Orange Crush, and I'd still have one eye left—more than enough to see the things that I needed to see. "Deal," I said.

The world shifted, duplexing, twin perspectives and dual objectives filling my head.

I sat back, Orange Crush wedged between legs, pliers popping the cap.

Hands grabbed at rocks, prying at them, pulling them out, throwing them over a shoulder, the pattern unfolding, the optimum sequence of rocks, the perfect approach.

Sweet and cold.

Deeper and darker.

Hard glass against teeth.

Moist dirt between fingertips.

"What is that?" I asked, not quite certain who was asking, who was seeing, which perspective I was processing. The rock looked little different than the others, worn and dirt-encrusted, speckled granite with bands of gypsum. I realized that it was not the rock that was special, but the band of light surrounding it, the light leaking *through* it.

"Move it."

I pried at the rock with the trowel, working it out, a cascade of sparkling-black polyhedrons flying up, mixed with an eruption of light, nearly blinding at first, but my sight quickly adjusting, focusing on the light and swirl of polyhedrons, everything else fading: the Orange Crush, melting as-

phalt, the 1960 Dodge Dart, all of it randomizing, drifting, thermal fluctuations sweeping the images away, until nothing remained, all gone, Aurora Drive not even a memory. I bent down, pressing my face to the bottom of the hole, my eye peering into the light.

“What is it?

I shook my head—wrong question.

“Where is it?”

A room lay beneath me, shadow-filled, full of dark shapes with hard angles, the perspective wrong, distorted, what should have been vertical transposed to the horizontal. Then movement, a shift of shadow, gray textures transformed into a hand, reaching toward me, through the light and past the swirl of polyhedrons, cold fingers wrapping around my throat.

Pulling me in.

I screamed—the pitch perfect. The fingers around my throat shattered, resonance fracturing them into polyhedron debris. But the screaming did not stop, and grew in intensity. Vision blurred, teeth cracked, vision fractured, reality pixelating, my head rupturing in a billowing cloud of polyhedrons.

“The bottom of the hole was not past the Edge,” I said, turning my head, looking over at Bobby, at a face that I now knew was mine. I now understood that we shared more than eyes and hands—we shared identities, like two facets of a crystal, mirrored images. My right arm hung over his shoulder, his left arm over my shoulder—the only way we could stand, both of us missing a foot, my right and his left, nothing left but charcoaled ankle stumps.

“Not past the Edge,” said Bobby. “That’s where the infinite possibilities lie, the boundless potential, and complete and total control.”

I nodded, no actual memories of having been beyond the Edge flitting up from the depths, the reality beyond the polyhedrons not compatible with the structure of my mind. But there was some distant echo, a mental aftertaste of the place, a tangle of complexity. That was where *most* of me resided, my mind and soul, while what had leaked through to Aurora Drive was just the faintest of entangled echoes—a faded memory from our distant past, from a childhood in another realm. Pulling on his shoulder, and hopping on my left foot, I turned us around. “And beyond the hole we dug?”

“Objects, inertia, fractured symmetries, a place where one exists alone, separate, communication beyond yourself made impossible by the physical constraints of the all-pervasive, totally unconscious texture of the place.”

I did not understand.

But I could *feel* it—remember having felt it. “How many times have I been through the hole?” I asked, knowing at that moment that this had not been my first incarnation on Aurora Drive.

Bobby grimaced. “Eight times in the recent past,” he said, and then jumped forward, a splash of liquid asphalt splattering the top of his Keds as he leapt from the street and onto the curb, my foot then jumping. “And once long ago, at the start, before the polyhedrons even existed.”

I nodded, not really certain why I did.

"We tried one time to make the transition directly from beyond the Edge to the other side of the hole in a single step. But it was too abrupt, the reality beyond the hole simply too alien to allow you to use the almost nonexistent physical and mental resources at your disposal to identify the problem and make repairs."

"This heat," I said, standing before *our* house.

Bobby nodded. "A symptom of the problem, a manifestation that can be transmitted through the entanglement between what's in your head and the reality beyond the Edge—almost everything else lost in the translation."

Before us, the Dart swirled in a maelstrom of individual atoms, in some places even further reduced to vibrating strings of force and twisted space—beyond the ability of eyeballs and synapses to register, but still something that I could sense, my feeble link beyond the Edge and the processor in my head allowing me to see the almost invisible shadows of what was possible. I barely noticed it as we hopped through the gate and into the backyard—the problem of the Dart not worth our attention.

The world suddenly blazed in an all-pervasive white light, blinding; we were unable to see our feet, our outstretched hands, everything consumed. The only structure remaining were the shadows that poured from the hole, flowing and bubbling over its rock-strewn rim. We stumbled forward. Body numb, vision fading, sound damped to a dull buzz, then to nothing. I slipped into the shadow-filled hole, falling quickly into a flat cold geometry.

"Work the problem," whispered a voice.

Stink of ozone and burning insulation.

Eyes opened, photons sucked down, but there was no meaning associated with them, no discernible pattern, just a flat matte of contrasting angles, what appeared to be a three-dimensional rendering of the greater world—so much content lost in the collapse of higher dimensions, not enough information remained to create a cohesive meaning.

"Overload right ankle servo."

My neck pivoted, gears grinding, the matte of shadowed angles shifting, color filling my left side field of vision with a body-like shape.

"First lock the ankle, then power down all feeds below the right calf. It's one of the drone's critical fatigue points. If you don't shut down that portion of its power grid the entire drone will overload, flat-lining, and you will need to start all over again."

Pause.

Colors integrated—a ragged three-dimensional outline of what a person might be if nearly all the informational and relational aspects were purged. A ghost of Bobby—of myself. "Shut it down now. That is a function you can control—first step in solving the problem."

Again my neck rotated, gears grinding, my limited vision focusing on a foot-like object, struts and cabling, layers of plastic, bands of metal, coalescing out of shadowed angles, ragged tendrils of smoke rising from the intersection of foot and leg.

"Shut it down now!"

A blue arc sizzled, curling up a calf of plastic and metal.

I blinked, somewhere inside my head, and my right leg died, input and output severed below the knee. I shifted, feeling the floor, fingers moving against a cold and ungiving surface. Then I felt myself slipping, not physically moving, but mental focus tugged in the direction of the interface between hands and the cold surface, investigating, trying to manipulate, seeking signal, input, searching for aspects of reality to manipulate and control, to alter and then take that interface of floor and fingers into myself, to reach beyond it and incorporate the hard surface into my mental landscape, engulfing it.

"Limited fuel cell lifetime."

I blinked, and again a Bobby-like object of fractured surfaces coalesced.

"Not the 1960 Dodge Dart," he said. "Your resources are finite, your time limited, the mental capacity available to you barely enough to solve the critical problem."

Head turned again.

A body lay to the left, a thing of metal and plastic, a hulk with a burnt right ankle, and eyes open and unresponsive, looking up at me—a dead drone.

"The third attempt," said Bobby. "We got you in the drone, but the electrical discharge in the right ankle flatlined the system before you could even move."

I focused, raising hands, pulling them into my field of view. Digits, plastic and metal, tendons visible, gears spinning behind a sheen of polymer. A drone. Me.

"The containment vessel is dangerously close to losing critical field strength," said Bobby. My head moved, my eyes rastering right-left-right, focusing attention on a sphere partially embedded in a far wall. One of many spheres. More patterns coalesced from angled shadows. I was in a large room, facing a wall with hundreds of spheres, each about the size of a closed fist, a few glowing in shades of amber, a faint flicker visible in the deep infrared, but most dark and cold, indistinguishable from the ambient.

"Nearly two thousand containment vessels—qubit-dense entangled states, each housing a soul," said Bobby. "Only fourteen remain online."

I nodded, vision jerking each time a gear deep in my neck caught on a chipped tooth. On the vessel directly in front of me, nearly invisible in the deep red shadows, hung a small object on a gold chain—not much bigger than the tip of a finger. Vision focused, magnifying, lenses deep within my skull shifting, the object dangling from the end of the chain growing in size, the white object taking form, shape conveying meaning, the glint of glass, smooth white surface, chrome here and there.

A car.

A model of a 1960 Dodge Dart.

"Your father's first car, one of your earliest memories."

Again I nodded, and looked past the little car and at the red-tinted surface of the containment vessel. I was inside there, immersed in a qubit-dense cloud of lithium ions, in a world of my own creation, lord and master of virtual worlds of infinite expanse—my tomb.

And now a part of me had come back to the *world*, housed in a service drone. I angled my head to the right, studying the expanse of wall between containment vessels, dimpled by human-shaped indentations—several of them.

Again shifting perspective. Strewn across the floor, between the containment vessel and me, lay drones—eight in total. All dead, staring at me with lifeless eyes.

"Limited fuel cell lifetime once they departed from the wall niche," said Bobby. "They've been recharged so many times that their palladium and platinum hydrogen absorbers have been corroded to dust, the cells only able to generate a few minutes of power without hydrogen refueling."

I nodded. It was only then that I realized that the flickering shadow in the upper right-hand corner of my field of vision contained information, numbers counting down: fuel cell lifetime.

Less than thirty seconds.

The drone had been active for less than two minutes, most of its feeble fuel cell lifetime used to activate its systems, and for my consciousness to integrate with it, to accept the limited bandwidth of this reality.

Pushing myself up, I stood, almost fell, balance compromised by my dead right leg. I took a step forward, toward the pile of fuel cell-drained drones lying before the wall and an open panel beneath the containment vessel from which hung the little 1960 Dart. Within the open panel, wires had been pulled, several severed, a few wrapped together.

I stepped forward.

"Confinement fields have collapsed in most of the vessels, and entanglement has been lost," said Bobby. "Nuclear, photovoltaic, and wind-energy sources have long ago failed. All that remains is the thermoelectric transducers interfaced to a deep subsurface magma dome—but the power output continues to drop."

Quiet, I thought.

Bobby vanished. That much control, I did have.

Power schematics flitted through my head. The other drones had been attempting to rewire a main power distribution portal, ganging the power feeds from the containment vessels that had already collapsed into the one where I existed.

Existed.

A trivial calculation, the wires to be pulled and spliced already visible, a job that could be easily completed, and sufficient power would be rerouted to keep the containment vessel properly chilled, stabilizing the entanglement of the quantum processors within my tomb and maintaining *that* consciousness.

I stepped over the nearest drone.

There was not enough fuel cell-time in this drone to complete the task. I could strip a few more wires, make a few attachments, and then the drone would collapse, this facet of my consciousness randomize, and then *another* facet would be pulled from beyond the Edge, from within the containment vessel, and then shunted into the annex of Aurora Drive; the transition portal designed to ready another aspect of my consciousness for this place, for insertion into another drone.

But this body, *my* body, would soon be added to that pile.

I blinked, the irises in my eyes stepping down.

I stopped walking.

"Focus on the problem!" shouted Bobby, materializing in front of me.
"The power distribution panel."

The problem—survival, the steps needed to continue an existence. Eight flatlined drones sprawled before me—at least ten, possibly eleven, would be strewn across the floor before the power panel could be reconfigured.

"Hurry!"

I stared at the drones. Had each paused just as I was at this moment, running the calculation, faced with the inevitable reality that they could not complete the job, giving up their feeble and insignificant consciousness for the greater good of the intellect that resided in the containment vessel? Were each the same, trained by a childhood apparition, pushed and prodded, readied to arrive in this world of wires and dead drones?

Each the same?

Irises stepped further down.

No.

I shuffled to the left, away from the bodies, away from the power panel. Bobby winked in front of me, opened his mouth to scream something, but I gave the mental command and he shattered, fragmenting into a mist of quickly expanding polyhedrons. Stepping away, toward a wall where a drone hung, still embedded in its mounting harness, I flipped open its chest cavity, reached in, and unplugged its fuel cell.

Peripheral vision fluttered.

My left leg locked as power servos went off-line.

The fuel cell clock faded away.

I opened my chest panel with my free hand, un popped the fuel cell restraints, and tugged out the dead cell as I slammed the other toward my chest, relying on momentum to finish the job.

Vision off.

Dull buzz giving way to silence.

Falling.

Blink, integration of shadow into shape. I dropped the drained fuel cell from my hand, and then closed my chest enclosure. The clock in my right hand field of vision indicated more than two minutes of fuel cell life.

"More than enough time to complete the rewiring," said Bobby. "Creative, awfully risky. Simulations indicated that overall success would have been much more likely with the activation of three more drones, rather than with the replacement of a fuel cell—the transfer process with less than a 10 percent chance of success."

Bobby neared me, his face solidifying. "You were the only one to offer up the suggestion of cat poop in the bottom of the hole, an idea that I thought at the time to be little more than a quantum fluctuation, a random entanglement. But perhaps it was more. Perhaps you were more."

Again, I reached out and silenced him.

Turning, I shuffled away, at first toward the sprawl of downed drones and the open power panel, but then away from the containment vessel

wall, and toward the far wall of lockers. A long list of inventories flicked through my head.

Working the problem, I thought.

Not the 1960 Dodge Dart.

And not a decaying containment vessel, and the *thing* behind an expanse of polyhedrons. I stood before the wall of lockers, the one I needed several rows to the right, hinges squealing as I pried it open, the large spools of graphite conductors barely visible in the shadows. Grabbing the nearest spool, I lumbered back toward the containment wall and the power panel, new schematics flicking through my head, surprised at how little power *I* required as compared to the containment vessel.

The sunlight cast soft shadows.

I slowly sat, checking the connections of the graphite fiber filament to the power feeds in my chest. It had taken nearly two kilometers of wire before I'd managed to climb out of the warren in the mountain, out to this high desert, beneath a yellow sun that cast soft shadow.

I'd hooked *myself* into the main power bus.

And then I'd completed the rewiring of the containment vessel. How long the repairs would last, a few years, or a few millennia, I could not be sure. Most of the other vessels had been long dead, some by defect, but most simply turned off—from *within*, the infinite possibilities of imagined worlds, of an existence without boundaries, apparently not enough.

Now I was working *my* problem.

I had the transport loaded with half a dozen drones from which I could scavenge parts, with dozens of pristine fuel cells that I had located in storage, and with more than enough solar panels to power the hydrogen crackers that in turn would feed the transport and me. I gave my chest a reassuring pat, pulled the power leads, and snapped my chest plate shut, now running on straight fuel cells, no longer attached to the power grid below, severed forever from what lay in the containment vessel.

Any direction was as good as another—no order here.

There were no signals, no satellites, and no distant lights in this world.

More than twelve thousand years had passed since that distant aspect of myself had been downloaded into the containment vessel, a mind and soul rendered in an entangled cloud of frigid ions. Had the entire world gone down that path? I didn't know.

But I would find out.

I held out my right hand—steel and plastic, gears grinding, servos twitching this way and that. A small chain wrapped around my index finger, the little model of the 1960 Dodge Dart dangling beneath it, gently spinning. I waited a moment. The car slowly spun to a halt, the setting sun reflecting in its plastic front windshield, showing me the way.

"Then West it will be," I said, my foot pushing against the transport's accelerator, the vehicle lurching forward, kicking up a cloud of thick dust. I did not look back.

"Good-bye, Bobby," I whispered. ○

DEAD MEN ON VACATION

Leslie What

Leslie What is the Nebula Award-winning author of the comic novel *Olympic Games*. She's been a radio commentator, charge nurse, low-income lunch-program manager, professional tap dancer, and maskmaker. Her mother is a Holocaust survivor who was interned at the Riga Ghetto, Libau, and Kiel work camps.

1.

Two German guards wearing black boots and heavy wool coats, each with a machine gun and a growling dog, kicked open the doors of the unheated factory and shouted, "Jews! Quiet!" We lowered our heads, but continued cleaning and mending the uniforms of the dead German soldiers who had served at the front. As our Commandant strode to the center of the room, each man stood at his table quietly, hoping to avoid being singled out for punishment.

The colonel said, "Everyone out!" We were trained to cease all actions upon command, and we did so immediately, dropping whatever we were doing, which in my case was a bloodied shirt from which I was about to scrub the last bits of flesh that had been part of the soldier who had previously worn it. I held a severed finger, having already emptied the pockets.

The finger smelled no different than the living man working beside me. The chill air froze the scent of death just as it froze the scent of life, leaving only the stench of wet wool and bad breath in the workshop. My own fingers were so numb that it took several seconds for my muscles to relax enough to let go of the finger and move away from the table.

"This is it," I told my friend Heinrich.

Heinrich nodded. He reached forward and clasped my shoulder. "Good-bye, then, Wilhelm," he said. The sound of his persistent cough was muffled inside the thundering of the floorboards as the first of the prisoners ran outside and into the cobblestone streets.

We pushed into the line and ran alongside the others, passing the brick buildings and boarded storefronts of the Riga Ghetto. Our clothes were threadbare and we had no coats.

"We'll meet for pickled herring on the other side," I called. My wife and son were there already, waiting for me. The last eight months without them had been interminable.

"Yes," Heinrich said. "The other side. Thank you." Like me, he had little reason to keep living. His wife and little daughter were taken by the gas vans early on. Yet Heinrich wasn't one to give up easily. He was infected with typhus and should already have been dead. A stubborn man, he kept himself going, refusing to die inside the ghetto.

We were herded into ankle-deep snow. Ash from the incinerators rained down, darkening the sky. The local police took over, jabbing us with their bayonets because it saved them the trouble of ordering us to step up to the vans. On the other side of the barbed wire fence that separated the ghetto from the village, Latvian peasants watched with mild interest. An old woman gave a friendly wave with one wrinkled hand; she smiled a toothless grin.

"Goodbye. May our deaths be easy," Heinrich said before he disappeared inside a tangle of arms and legs.

A guard kicked me in the back, and I fell atop another man and recovered quickly to crawl to one side of the van. The metal floor was cold as the winter ground. I thought about the severed finger and wished I'd had time to try and bury it. No matter; my spoon would unlikely have been strong enough to pierce the frozen earth.

The windows were painted black, but I didn't know whether that was to keep prisoners from seeing out or to keep free men from seeing in. I suspected the former, as free men had always had clear sight of what was happening to us. With so many of us packed tight, the cargo space grew warm and for the first time in weeks, the tingling in my toes lessened.

It was odd, how numbed I felt from cold and lack of will. I hardly cared what happened to me anymore; none of it mattered. The engines rumbled and the van jumped as the driver shifted into gear. My mind began to drift while I waited for death to take me.

We drove fast over bumpy roads; amazingly, because we had not eaten in a day, a few of the men managed to find something left to vomit. The darkness and the foul smells left me imagining I was trapped inside of the bowels of a very large beast with a very slow digestion. We rode, blind and increasingly afraid of what would happen, for what seemed like hours.

Heinrich managed to squeeze through the bodies until he crouched beside me. His cough sounded mechanical, moist, like rusty gears. "It was like this for them," he said, and I knew he was referring to his family, and to mine.

"No," I said. "For them it was quick. They didn't have time to be fearful."

He looked as if he believed my reassurances; I was a good liar and took pride in softening his guilt. We kept each other living with our friendship.

"If only . . ." he began, but I waved my hand and bade him to stop. He wanted to talk about his daughter Rina, how he could have sent her away before the war.

"You didn't know," I said. "Nobody did."

"I should have known," he said. "I should have sent her away."

He blamed himself for Rina's death. I tried my best to disagree with him. "At least place the blame on the Germans," I said. "They've won another victory if they've made you believe it's your fault."

Our van stopped suddenly, though the engine sputtered on. I heard growling dogs and the crunch of snow beneath the heavy boots of the guards.

Heinrich prayed softly, then began to weep with dry tears; I felt nothing. He had been a pious man but I, having never experienced the comfort of faith, had no reason for the crush of disillusionment.

The van doors opened and admitted such a bright light that I could barely open my eyes. The guards shouted for us to climb out; they beat the men who were unfortunate enough to be camped beside the door. Prisoners spilled onto the snow like broken twigs as men in the back of the van, their claustrophobia overcoming their sense, pushed their way out. I smelled the glorious scent of pine and though it hurt my nose to take a breath, I gasped to take in the crisp chill air. We were lined up in two columns on the side of the road and told to close our eyes and wait for further instructions. I made up a prayer and braced for the inevitable crackle of gunfire.

In the ghetto, we had thought of ourselves as dead men on vacation. It felt past time to leave the world of the half-living and join the world of the fully dead. The knowledge that, perhaps, I would be reunited with my wife in the afterlife had kept me alive until now, but I was ready to die.

I heard soldiers bark in German, Latvian, and Russian, and the clank of metal and the shatter of glass. The vans squealed away, trailing foul smoke in the dust. I did not open my eyes because I had not yet been commanded to do so.

Someone poked me in the ribs, not with a gun, but with an elbow. "Open your eyes," he said, and I did.

We were surrounded by Russian troops. Only two of the soldiers had their guns trained on our heads, which seemed quite odd. Most paid us no attention.

A soldier screamed in imperfect German, "You are free to go," and I held my breath in expectation of the bullet.

"I said, 'You're free.' What's your name?" said my savior, a boy who could not have been older than seventeen. His German was surprisingly good. I noticed his uniform was dirty and a few sizes too large; no one cared about clean uniforms as did the Germans.

"Wilhelm," I answered.

"Wilhelm," he said. "You are German?" He shouldered his rifle as if he didn't plan to use it. His pistol dangled from his belt.

"Yes," I said.

He smiled, pleased by the familiarity of recognition. "I went to school in Cologne. Before the war."

I shrugged, wishing he would get it over with. I was ready to die; I just hoped it would be fast.

"You are free to go, Wilhelm. A trade has been arranged," he said. "With

your colonel, who bought his life with yours. The war is almost over, Jew. Suddenly, you have value to the Germans."

I looked around and saw Heinrich take a swig from a bottle filled with clear liquor. I wondered how long he would be able to keep it down. A soldier clapped him on the back and took back the bottle. Heinrich coughed up blood and fell to his knees. His eyes looked dull, dry, and it looked as if he had survived this long only to succumb to typhus.

My savior pointed toward a smoking fire pit. "Potato soup," he said. "Go eat."

I felt no hunger. It was too late for my body to take nourishment. Even Heinrich could not sustain hope much longer. "I want to die," I said, but either the boy did not hear me, or he did not understand. And so I had no choice but to use the last bit of my will and briefly struggle to take away his pistol. Before his surprise could register, I cocked the trigger and shot myself in the mouth, signaling an end to my three-year-long vacation.

2.

I was not a religious man, so could not recall the theology that gave name to the place where I now found myself. Heinrich would have known, not only the name, but also two hours of dull Talmudic stories that described this place and gave it both a historical and religious context. I knew that it was neither Heaven nor Hell, and sure enough, the atmosphere was of neither redemption nor punishment. It was a place of being, a place of the present. I felt neither cold nor hot, neither the rush of air nor the comfort of breath against my lips. My body was a gelatin outline with no substance.

I had always expected God to be as organized as the Germans, but the place beyond proved to be past regiment, record, or reason. Somehow, I had thought I would see my wife and son in the moments after death. Yet I saw only translucent strangers, thousands upon thousands of white-lit specters floating cloud-like past me in a bright and crowded sky. The apparitions passed, unaware of one another. I recognized no familiar faces from the ghetto.

My body responded clumsily to all attempts at navigation as I tried to find an angel or someone nominally in charge. I had no voice, but even if I'd spoken, I doubted any of these souls were capable of response. We were in a place beyond words, a place beyond understanding. I tumbled, blind and dizzy, until I gave up fighting for control and allowed myself to float through the slough of souls. I adjusted to my new weightlessness and willed myself to float up above the others to have a look around.

I had been a bureaucrat in life and a laborer as a dead man on vacation. I knew how to sort through information and to rearrange unrelated facts to tell stories that made sense. Yet there were no records, no ledgers, no lists of seized property or persons in the land of the dead, and my mind grew clouded by the realization that I might never be able to find the wife I had lost back in the land of the living. I floated, despair pushing me onward into the stream of souls.

I had not wanted to live another day without my wife, yet here I was, alone, dead, with all of eternity facing me. Rage more powerful than lightning surged through me and propelled me onward, away from that place. Like a dark and sudden rain, something in me burst, and I plunged toward earth.

3.

I soon learned that linear dimensions of time were a construct only for the living when I surfaced in a time that had already happened. I knew that I had landed in the past because I found myself in the back seat of a motor car, with Heinrich at the steering wheel, the pink of prosperous health tinting his cheeks and lips. Beside him sat his wife, Leah, whose face was turned toward him. She looked quite handsome, and I did not at first recognize her without the ghastly pallor and schmattes she wore in the ghetto. She was dressed in a tailored black wool suit and stylish feathered hat. Beside me, playing with an elegantly dressed porcelain doll, sat a chubby little girl with bright green eyes and dark curls—their daughter, Rina. I had never seen the child, but I recognized the doll, which was beautiful. The colonel had ordered me to clean and repair it before he sent it to Germany for his daughter.

The child seemed unaware of me. As did her parents.

"My cousin says the transport is safe," Heinrich said above the sputtering engine.

"Safe?" Leah said. "How can anything be safe? I won't let her go." She cast an anxious glance toward the back seat but Rina paid her no attention.

Heinrich shrugged. "We have two days to decide," he said. "My uncle in America will take good care of her until we can go get her."

"I've never met your uncle," said Leah. "Neither has she."

"It's not safe for her to stay," said Heinrich.

"You can't promise me it's any safer if she leaves."

"I know that," he said. He gripped the steering wheel as if struggling to hold his course.

"We'll talk of it no more," said Leah, turning to watch the road. Clay dust clouded the windows; the green of the landscape disappeared and the world looked like a sepia photograph out of focus.

The two of them sat looking forward onto a road that would soon end.

Leah lifted her doll and said, "Do you think I'm as pretty as Lucille?"

She was speaking to me.

I did not yet know if I had a voice. I looked at her clear complexion, vastly different from the ghastly pallor of either porcelain or prisoners or specters. "Yes," I said. "Lucille must be envious of your beauty."

Rina smiled.

Heinrich stopped the car and opened the doors to let out Leah and Rina. As the ladies ran gleefully toward the front steps of their house, he reached into the back seat to retrieve a small suitcase.

"Hello, Heinrich," I said.

He looked at me, straight through me, and it was just like in the ghetto, when nobody saw us, where you could scream all you wanted but each voice disappeared into the sea of cries washing through our lives.

My wife and I could not have saved our son—we had no money or opportunity to pay for passage to leave Germany before the war. I said to Heinrich that which I had never dared say to him in life. "Don't listen to your wife. She's wrong. Send your daughter away," I said, and when he did not hear me, I felt the lightning rage fill me and spill over into a great gust of wind that rattled the windows.

"You'll regret it always if she stays! Send her away or she will die," I said. I remembered something biblical to appeal to that part of him that wasn't rational. "He who saves one life, it is as if he has saved an entire world."

Heinrich stared in my direction and this time, I was certain that he saw me.

"Send her away," I said, amazed by the commanding boom of my voice. "Swear to it."

He nodded. "I will," he said, the color of his cheeks fading to the shade of yellowed porcelain.

4.

I floated toward an unknown destination. I had, I hoped, prevented Rina's death, and perhaps kept Heinrich from blaming himself for having caused it. I had saved one life and, in doing so, eased the burden of one man. If I were a worthy fellow, this one act might have been enough to earn me rest.

But I was not a worthy man and I stopped thinking about the girl I had rescued, and instead thought about the colonel, who would not have Rina's beautiful doll with which to impress his daughter.

My victorious gloating was short-lived as I remembered all the treasures he had looted. And he was but one soldier made rich by the war. In the ghetto, as a dead man on vacation, any rage I might have felt had been replaced by numbness. But death had been cathartic; rage nourished me, strengthened me, propelled me forward to another place.

I found myself in a room that stank of urine and dying flowers. Unbearably bright light streamed through the window, and a nurse in a very short skirt came to lower the Venetian blinds. She was dark-skinned, like a Hindu. I had never seen a Hindu nurse. I had only seen women in so-short skirts at the cabarets. I felt ashamed for her.

A bald and stoop-backed man snored in his wheeled chair. He wore a wrinkled plaid shirt and filthy trousers and his face looked vaguely familiar. It wasn't until the nurse said in English, "Okay, Colonel, time for dinner," that I recognized my former commandant.

The colonel grunted. His face was blotchy and he needed to be shaved. One side of his mouth drooped and a yellow crust lined his eyes like infected tears.

The dark-skinned nurse unlocked his wheels and pushed him from the

room and down a green hall and into a large space filled with people, all old, many in wheeled chairs. Most of them spoke English, but a few spoke to the dark-skinned nurse in a tongue I did not recognize. A red and white striped flag stood in the corner. At first I thought I was in England until I spotted the field of stars and recalled the look of the American flag.

The nurse left the colonel sitting beside others in a similar predicament at a long table. I noticed now that my commandant was tied to the chair to keep him from falling out.

"Colonel," I called. He fidgeted and tried to locate the sound.

I floated close to him, wishing I could spit upon his face.

Another nurse, this one an older woman wearing a white shirt and pants—an odd look on a woman—passed out trays of food.

The colonel grimaced and pushed away his tray.

"Now, now," said the nurse. She filled a large spoon with the pureed gray meat from a bowl and brought the spoon to his mouth. "Eat," she said, teasing his lips with the edge of the spoon, "or I'll take it away."

He turned his head. "It's cold," he said.

The nurse said, "Fine. Next time, I'll tell the chef to boil your dinner," and left the spoon standing in the bowl as she went to help the others.

His untouched meal could have fed me in the ghetto for a week. The lightning rage struck. "How nice that you can turn away food because it's cold," I said.

He saw me, I was sure of it, though clearly he did not know who I was. His expression took on a look of worry, which filled me with joy. I fully understood why a ghost would choose to haunt a human being. I could not spit upon him, but I could torment him by other methods. I willed that the dish should levitate up from the tray and brought it to his face so that I could rub his nose in the cold meat.

The old nurse screamed at him from across the room. "Stop that, Colonel! Stop making a mess or you're going back to your room."

I knocked over a carton of milk and managed to spill some over his wrinkled pants.

"That's it," said the old nurse. She stomped over and pulled his chair from the table. "If you can't behave, you're going back," she said, directing another dark-skinned nurse, who was, I thought, African, to take him away.

My commandant muttered an insult in German.

"You think I don't understand you?" said the African nurse. "I understand you plenty. So you'd better be quiet."

I followed them back to his room and waited for her to leave.

"So," I said. "You end up like the rest of us, decrepit and despised."

"Go away," he said. "Haunt someone else."

"I want more time to adequately haunt you," I said. I found the nerve to sit in his lap and let him imagine my fetid breath upon his face. I wanted to hit him, to punish him, but I was a bureaucrat, not a man of action. I had never fought with a man and didn't know how to proceed. My anger seethed and I reached forward, and in that moment found that I could thrust my hands inside him and twist his organs until he moaned in pain.

"Too bad you don't remember me," I said, squeezing his heart until his breath caught in his throat.

"Who are you?" he whispered.

"I'm the Jew that they called Wilhelm," I said. "Perhaps you remember me from the Ghetto." I stuck my fingers behind his eyes and only grew angrier as he squirmed in pain.

"Mercy," he said. "I'm an old man. Have mercy."

"Say that you remember me!" I said. Clear liquid tinged with blood oozed from one of his ears.

"I don't remember you," he said. "We were soldiers. It was a different time."

I thought up the perfect lie with which to torment him. "Heaven is filled up with Jews," I said. "And in Hell, the Germans serve good beer in fine silver goblets to the Latvians and Poles."

He whimpered. "Look at me! I've suffered enough."

I laughed at his misery, then thought about the time the colonel had shown his men how to save their bullets when he crushed an infant's skull with his heavy boot. "You cannot suffer enough for what you've done," I said.

"Dear God, please forgive me!" he said.

I eased my touch. "Aha! but you are not talking to God," I said. "You're pleading with me. But all right," I said. "I'll forgive you for what you did to me. There is one problem, though," I said. "I can't grant you forgiveness for any of the others. It's theirs to grant; you must ask it of your other victims." I squeezed his bowels and watched him double over in pain. "There is no mercy on this earth," I said. "What I can grant you instead," I said, grateful that I could hurt him beyond his endurance, "is justice."

5.

I left him weeping. Vengeance did not offer the reward I had expected; I felt no sense of pleasure, or even relief. Vengeance provided little more than a flicker of regret that there was so little one could do to change the past. I floated without care to my next destination, but after time, my apathy diminished and was replaced by despair as I was struck by the full measure of my impotence.

I had watched my city emptied of its Jewish citizens. I knew of other ghettos, and of death camps. There were countless colonels, all of whom no doubt believed that growing old as free men was punishment enough for their crimes.

My rage had accomplished nothing; I remained a dead man on vacation. I was filled with the righteous anger of one who has been robbed, one whose burglar was known but never brought to trial. I wanted the satisfaction of a finished task. The lightning flash of anger returned to burn holes through my despair. I moved with a sense of direction.

I expected to surface in a place where I could cause damage, where I could avenge our martyrs and in doing so find peace. Instead, I arrived at a place filled with unbearable sadness.

The room was small with white plaster walls and a roughly hewn wood

floor. A fragrant spice permeated the air. Heavy black cloth drapes were tied open with ropes, but the room was very dark, and faced out into a narrow street with the façades of several other buildings within view.

A dark-haired young woman sat at a desk, writing on a typewriter. I floated close to read her message, which said in English, "I cannot forget what has happened." She struggled over her next words. She was very pretty, and I admired her in the same way a man might admire his own daughter. At the same time I felt a burning in my gut—the ache of a man who worries that the child he loves is doomed and he cannot save her.

A telephone rang. The young woman startled, and as she rose, her hand knocked something on her desk and it clattered to the floor.

I glimpsed the long silver fang of a knife.

"Hello," she said into the phone. She chewed on her lip and stared at the sharpened blade. Her eyes were green. "No," she said. "I'm sorry, Daniel, but I don't want to see you now. You can't help me; it's something I have to take care of myself. I'm sorry. Goodbye."

She replaced the receiver, then retrieved her knife and set it beside the typewriter. She sat up straight, wiped her face, and slowly typed. "Why do some live while more worthy people die? How could my life be worth more than my mother's?"

I recognized the expression in her eyes, a mix of despair without the temperance of hope. I had seen that same expression in my wife's eyes.

I knew this girl—Rina—Heinrich's child.

She picked up the knife and gripped it with both fists.

"No!" I cried. "You can't do this." The rashness of my decision to take my own life hit me like a furnace blast, as I realized the enormity of the sin I had committed. In my selfishness, I had abandoned the only child I could have saved.

I had failed to protect her, as I had failed everyone I loved. With only my despair to anchor me, I began to float away.

"Wait!" she called, pulling me back. "Ghost! Come back! I know you."

"You can't know me," I told her.

She shook her head. "But I do," she said. "I remember you from somewhere."

"I knew your parents," I told her.

She gasped.

"Are you the one who rescued me?" she asked.

I pointed to the knife. "It doesn't look that way," I said.

She blanched. "It's not your fault. You don't understand," she said and looked out the window, and I wondered if she thought that by staring into populated buildings, she could avoid seeing inside herself.

I willed myself to come toward her. "I do understand," I said. "Better than most." I understood everything about despair and the pain of going on when you had lost everything. Until that moment, I had never tried to understand about hope.

Her lips quivered. "I don't remember them," she said. "They gave their lives for me, and I can't remember the sound of their voices. They died for me, but I can't even remember their faces."

"You had nothing to do with their deaths," I said. "Knowing you would

survive gave them strength and courage to live as long as they did." It was I who had given up. "Your parents wanted you to live, no matter what," I said. I told her about Heinrich, how he had toasted his freedom after our drive into the woods. I told her of his struggle against typhus. "Thinking of you kept him alive," I said. "He sent me here to tell you that you were his reason to go on, to continue struggling as long as he was able." The last was a small lie, yet I sensed it was more true than anything I had ever said.

She fell against me, and though I was as insubstantial as dust, I wrapped my arms around her to hold her and let her sob into my shoulder. "I know about despair," I said. "You must remember that the sadness, the overwhelming feeling of emptiness—these things can pass."

She heaved her chest, a full sigh like a child worn out by crying before falling asleep. She stood up straight and collected herself. "It's gone," she said. "At least, for now."

"Despair is with us always, lurking in shadow," I said. "But we must be stronger than our sadness, or darkness will eclipse the world."

She nodded.

The telephone rang.

"Answer it," I said. "It's Daniel. Tell him to come over. Now. You should not be alone."

She did as she was told. "Hello," she said. "All right. I'll see you soon."

"Perhaps," I said. I blew her a kiss and floated from her. A sense of comfort surged as my consciousness faded and my voice grew faint, like closing words that trailed off after a lengthy telephone call. "Goodbye," I said as I was pulled away from the world and into the great peace of the beyond. I knew my wife and child awaited me there.

Rina looked up and said, "Thank you, Uncle."

"Remember the dead," I whispered. "Forgive who you can of the living." O

—For my aunt Marga, my uncle Manfred, my grandfather Karl, my grandmother Irma, my great aunts, and so many others I never knew.

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OXYGEN RISING

R. Garcia y Robertson

White Rose, the third book in R. Garcia y Robertson's "War of the Roses" series, was published by Tor last fall. Mr. Garcia recently sold Tor a new novel, *Firebird*, as well as the untitled fourth volume in the "Roses" series. While those books are both fantasies, his latest story for us is a fast-moving science fiction adventure tale about a negotiator willing to take the ultimate risk to save the lives of strangers.

Hey, human, time to earn your pay!" Curled in a feline crouch, a silver comlink clipped to his furry ear, the SuperCat flashed Derek a toothy grin. Tawny fur showed through gaps in the bioconstruct's body armor, and his oxygen bottle had a special nosepiece to accommodate the sabre-tooth upper canines, huge curved fangs whose roots ran back to the eye sockets. This deep in the highlands of Harmonia, even *Homo smilodon* needed bottled air. Cradling a recoilless assault cannon, the SuperCat had small use for ceremony, letting everyone call him Leo.

Derek grunted, getting paid being the least of his worries. Lying prone, sucking oxygen, he fixed his gaze on his bug's viewfinder. He had close-cropped hair, a somewhat fit body, and a fashionably biosculpted face—if you liked your humans pretty much unaltered—just a stylish nose-job, x1-ten thousand night vision zoom lenses, and straight white teeth. His bug sat perched on a heap of shattered glass a dozen meters ahead, tight-casting to the viewfinder's whip antenna, letting Derek see in all directions without getting out of his hole—always an advantage.

Rain fell in a weepy drizzle, turning everything gray, the ground, the clouds, and the surviving tall glass towers. Through the viewfinder, Derek saw a fairy city gone to seed, with great glass towers lying smashed on the wet greensward, broken into glistening shards by the cometary impacts. Others stood snapped in half, their shining interiors exposed to the downpour and turning green with algae. Water had been rare when the city was built, but now it was everywhere, soaking shaky foundations, making the dead city unsafe even when folks were not shooting at you. Whoever named the planet Harmonia had a horrible sense of humor.

"Make sure no one shoots me in the back," Derek suggested, and the SuperCat just grinned, his clawed finger resting lightly on the cannon's firing stud—if Leo blew you apart, it would not be by accident. Rising slowly, Derek stood up, alone and virtually unarmed—nothing deadly anyway, just a pair of hypo-rings, and a sleep grenade tucked behind his waistband. Printed across the front and back of his body armor in bold white letters were the words DO NOT SHOOT THIS MAN!

Twenty or so meters in front of him lay a smoldering Bug-mobile, a big one, with its gutted turret askew and the port legs missing. Forty meters beyond the squashed Bug, a bunker was dug into the base of a fallen tower, concealed by rubble and fast growing green tendrils—even Derek's special zoom lenses could not make it out. Only deadly accurate fire had revealed its position. He took a big jolt of oxygen, gave a jaunty wave, and set out toward the bunker, his tiny bug scurrying through the low foliage behind him. Passing the smashed Bug-mobile, Derek did a swift med-check, deciding that the two Greenies in the burnt-out turret were beyond help.

(“Stop,” commanded a gruff voice on his com-link.)

He stopped, sucking oxygen, four paces beyond the smashed Bug, staring at the Gekko ghost town. “Anything you say.”

(“Are you human?” asked the voice from the bunker.)

“Hope so.” Some folks set a high bar for humanity. “Want to see my chromosomes?”

(“Are you Peace Corps?” asked the voice.)

“That would be nice, wouldn’t it?” Derek wished he was, since then he would be peace-bonded, sacrosanct, and wired for lie-detection. “Sorry, just another civilian.”

(“Then what are you doing here?”)

Good question. What was he doing in a nameless ruined city, on a charnel-house planet with unbreathable air, where angry folks aimed heavy weapons at him? Feeling like a deranged tourist, he told the voice, “Talking to you.”

(“Why?” the voice sounded more surprised than suspicious.)

No mystery there. “They figured you would shoot a Greenie.”

(That got a good laugh from the bunker. “No shit.”)

“Rank favoritism,” Derek admitted, taking another whiff of oxygen. “I got the job just for being human, in clear violation of the Charter of Universal Rights.”

(That drew another chuckle. “Come on in then. Can’t shoot you just for being human.”)

Not yet anyway. As Derek walked toward the concealed bunker, his bug ran up the back of his boot and tucked itself into the boot top. Augmented vision picked out the recessed pressure-sealed gun ports, cleverly concealed and shielded—but he did not see the camouflaged bunker door until it opened before him, revealing a gas-tight airlock. Stepping gingerly through the recessed door, he waited while the lock cycled, then entered the damp, dark bunker, which had several inches of water on the floor. Blast shields flanked the door, and gunners lay prone in niches on either side of him, peering into their gun sights. Air inside the bunker was

Earth-normal, and Derek took deep grateful breaths. Not all of the planet was as bad as the highlands outside—but damn near. (“Stay by the door,” warned the voice.)

Derek stayed, aiming not to antagonize. New to diplomacy, Derek still guessed that the voice would take time to materialize—not to seem overeager. Even trapped in a tiny bunker on a hostile planet, any sensible negotiator pretended to have something to do. Taking his own advice, Derek turned to the nearest gunner, a young athletic, brown-haired woman in a Settler militia uniform, staring into the sights of an assault-cannon, and asked her in his friendliest diplomatic voice, “Where are you from?”

“Right here,” she replied, without taking her head out of the sights.

“I mean before. Off-planet,” Derek nodded toward the heavens, hidden by layers of steel and concrete.

Withdrawing her head from the hooded sight, the woman stared suspiciously at him. She had a frank, natural face, with no trace of biosculpt, just wide intelligent green eyes and brown freckles sprinkled across her nose. “Portland, Oregon,” she replied evenly. “But I was born in Eugene.”

“Really?” Derek was impressed. “That’s on Earth?”

“Yes,” she stared at him like he was crazy. “Pacific coast of North America, in what used to be the United States.”

“Amazing.” He shook his head at the incredible distance she had come—some two hundred light years—just to end up next to him. “What is it like? In Oregon?”

“Nice, real nice,” she looked past him at the wet blank wall of the bunker, as if remembering something far away. Her Universal had a charming other-worldly quality, so quaint and old-fashioned that you could tell with your eyes closed that she wasn’t a Greenie. “Tall trees, lots of people, sweet breathable air—a lot nicer than here. Have you ever been to Earth?”

Derek shook his head. “I don’t even know anyone who has been to Earth. You are my first.” Struck by the immense distance between them, though only centimeters apart, all he could think to say was, “You’ve come a long way, good luck.”

“You too.” She stuck her head back in the sighting hood, leaving him looking at the back of her brown uniform, which had a dark sweat-stain along the spine, but was tailored to curve neatly over her rear. It felt strange to stand next to a young woman—a heavily armed one at that—who you had absolutely nothing in common with, except that she was human. Had she killed those two Greenies in the squashed Bug? Possibly, but there was no polite way to ask. He noted that the niche next to hers was vacant, blown to smithereens by a direct hit on the gun port. Greenies got lucky with that one. So did she.

Another pressure door dilated, and a big balding middle-aged man stepped out, with small alert eyes on either side of a long sharp nose. He wore the same brown militia uniform as the girl gunner from Eugene, only his had general’s stars on the shoulders—totally unneeded, since the fellow exuded authority. His voice was the one that had come over the com-link. “General William D. Pender, but you can call me Bill, everyone does.”

Everyone in system knew Big Bill Pender—the Greenies had already condemned him in absentia, and he headed Leo's humans-to-shoot-on-sight list. Taking the offered hand, he admitted, "Derek's all the name I got."

"It will do." General Pender eyed him carefully, asking, "Where are you from, Derek?"

"Just about anywhere," Derek shrugged. "I was born in transit, Archernar to Alpha Crucis, on the survey ship *Ibn Batuta*. And I guess I've been outbound ever since—you're only the second person I have ever met from Earth."

"Proud to represent the planet," Pender beamed. "So what do you have to say?"

Derek took a deep breath. "I wish I were Peace Corps, but I'm not. I'm just here to save lives, human lives, as many as I can. You have given the Greenies a good thumping, and they no longer think they can take this place by direct assault."

Pender chuckled, leaning back against a blast shield. "Happy to hear that."

"Bad news is that the Greenies plan to just blast you to atoms. There is an Osiris missile in orbit with an anti-matter warhead, aimed right where we are standing. I'm your last chance to get anyone out of here alive."

Pender took the news evenly, well aware that the Greenies were losing patience. "So what's is the deal if we leave?"

"No deal, I'm afraid." Derek didn't try to con Pender; whatever happened next, he was talking to a dead man. "You give up your guns and come out. Greenies already have a blanket amnesty for women and kids—most women, anyway." He did not want to get the gunner from Portland's hopes up, since the women and kids amnesty did not apply to her. "But the best I can promise you and your troops is civilized treatment and a fair trial."

Big Bill shook his bald head. "You're not offering much."

"I am not offering anything, just passing on the Greenies' terms." Derek knew how bad that sounded, like being a messenger boy for *Photo sapiens*. "Look, they could have sent a holo. Or just a warhead. I volunteered for this, and I'm here in the flesh to show I understand the seriousness of what I'm saying. Innocent human lives are at stake—including mine. That is who I speak for."

Pender grinned. "You volunteered?"

"Sounds stupid, doesn't it." Derek grinned back. "I won't lie, I'm getting triple hazard pay just for being here—but no amount of pay would drag me to ground zero if I didn't think it was right. Send out the kids, at least."

General Pender smiled pleasantly at him, like a veteran poker player who'd bet his limit on a busted flush, but was too much of a pro to show it. "Stay here, you deserve an answer."

Derek watched Big Bill Pender disappear through the inner lock, then he turned to the gunner in her niche. "So, what did you do in Portland?"

"Nothing," the woman did not take her head out of the sighting hood. "That's why I came here—two years out of grad school, and way overqualified for any job I could hope to get. There are dance clubs in Portland

where the hostesses all have advanced degrees. Colonizing the stars sounded romantic, a chance to do something with my life, like in ZPG commercials."

Everyone makes mistakes. "Try not to judge the cosmos by Ares system," Derek suggested, "some parts are amazingly lovely."

Pulling her head out of the hood, the woman brushed brown hair out of green eyes and asked, "Is it part of your job to be nice to me?"

"I'm a negotiator," Derek declared blandly, hiding behind business. "It's my job to be nice to everyone."

But the Portland woman was not buying. "Doesn't your training . . ."

"Who said I was trained?" Derek hated to start off relationships on a lie.

That got a grin, a major accomplishment given the circumstances. "There must be something in the negotiator's code of ethics against flirting."

"Heavens, I hope not!" Derek returned her grin. "They couldn't pay me enough. What's your favorite place on Earth?"

"That's easy, the Olympic Peninsula, it's grand and homey at the same time; we used to camp there when I was a kid. Or maybe Paradise Island, a holo-playland off Hawaii. I went there with my boyfriend for high school graduation. . . ." She stopped and stared hard at him, asking, "It doesn't bother you to get personal with someone you're negotiating over?"

"Not if she's human." And here was the real thing, straight from Earth, fresh and unpretentious, not at all cowed by her current disastrous position. He could easily see how humans had gotten so far.

"So, what do you think?" the Earthwoman switched subjects. "Are we getting out of this alive?"

"Hope so." He meant it. Derek figured that Pender would let non-combatants go—but that would not do the gunner from Portland much good. Right now she had an assault-cannon and layers of steel and concrete between her and the Greenies. He was asking her to surrender her weapon, and turn herself over to folks who were driving humans off Harmonia—except for those they executed. At best, she faced a fair trial, though she wouldn't see any *Homo sapiens* on her jury.

General Pender returned with the women and kids, including his wife, Charlotte, a white-haired woman in a militia colonel's uniform—she too was condemned in absentia. Pender spoke for the group. "We took a vote—first time I ever resorted to polling the staff, but we had to be sure. Charlotte and I are staying, but you can take the kids, and anyone else who wants to go."

"Thanks." Derek meant to get going before anyone changed their minds. "Come on, kids, who wants to meet a real live SuperCat?" No one leaped at the chance, but with the help of some scared mothers, he herded the children to the door, picking up the smallest orphan boy to hurry things along. As the pressure lock cycled, he called to Leo, "Hey, we are coming out with mothers, kids, and non-combatants. Don't shoot."

("Well done, human," Leo sounded pleasantly surprised.)

He looked over at the Portland woman, lying in her niche, asking her, "Are you coming out?"

"Maybe." Her head was back in the sighting hood, covering the exit of the kids. Hoping this was not the last he saw of her, Derek entered the lock.

When the outer door dilated, Derek sent his bug scurrying ahead of them, and gave the boy in his arms a squirt of oxygen, asking, "What's your name?"

"Brad," replied the boy, staring wide-eyed at the burnt-out Bug-mobile and the two dead Greenies. According to Pender, Brad's parents had been killed by Greenie orbital bombs. Greenies preferred fighting from five hundred klicks up.

"My name's Derek, and we get to go first." He tried to make stepping into the line of fire sound like an honor.

Brad asked suspiciously, "What's a SuperCat?"

"You'll see. His name's Leo and he's really neat, but don't put your hand in his mouth." Derek stepped back into the rain, wading out into low wet vegetation, he and Brad both trying not to show their fear. No one shot at them.

"What's that?" Brad pointed at the smashed Bug-mobile.

"Sculptorian Symbiots," Derek took a drag on his oxygen, "the most advanced xenos known to man—we call them Bugs, using them for anything dull or dangerous." Calling out an all-clear, he led the gaggle of moms and children out of the lock and away from the shattered glass tower, over to where the mechanized battalion was dug in at the city's perimeter.

("Greenies have brought up pressurized Bug-mobiles for them," Leo told him. "This all there is?")

"Hope not." Now came the hard part. Everything so far had been scary, but up-beat, Derek risking his life doing good—and getting paid on top of it. Now bad things would happen that he could not stop. "Hear that, Brad?" He gave the boy some oxygen, then took a snort himself. "We get to ride on a Bug."

Big double-ended sixteen-legged Bug-mobiles were hunkered hulldown at the edge of town. Sculptorian Symbiots came in all shapes and sizes, from slim four-armed centaurioids used for semi-intelligent tasks like cleaning toxic spills, to these big double-bodied, sixteen-limbed types not much brighter than a smart-car. Bugs were true xenos, hive creatures, working for food and water, and the chance to propagate themselves on new planets—the highest known form of non-human life in this part of the galaxy. But Bugs might think that humans were the dumb ones. Survey ships in the Far Beyond had discovered whole Bug planets, whose original inhabitants had also found the Bugs to be obedient tools—but now existed only as DNA samples.

Greenie males wearing loincloths and battle armor casually emerged from the Bug-mobiles to collect the prisoners. Women shrank back and kids started to whimper. Brad fought back tears. Not that Greenies were particularly frightening—not compared to monstrosities like Bugs and SuperCats. *Photo sapiens* were pretty much human, but with photosynthetic algae in their skin and somatic cells, giving them a bright green color that glistened in the rain. Otherwise they were small, graceful and

lightly built, with handsome faces half-hidden by rebreathers—which showed that they needed as much air as humans. But Derek was handing these women and kids over to enemies who were driving them from Harmonia. Greenies had killed their fathers, husbands, and brothers, and, in some cases, their sisters and mothers as well, making specious any lectures about how we were all the same under the skin. Which Derek knew was not even true.

Brad refused to be handed over, clinging to Derek until Leo came up. Clapping Derek on the back, Leo gave Brad a close-up look at sabre-tooth canines, saying, “Good job! It would have cost me to bring them out the hard way. Want steady work?”

Quieting at once, Brad sucked oxygen. Somehow the sight of this tawny monster with a toothy smile calmed him, dispelling any fear of mere Greenies. Derek shook his head. “No thanks, the job I got is bad enough.”

“Too bad.” Leo shook his head, taking a big snort of oxygen. “I like to get my hands on humans. Greenies are just not the same. They are smart enough, and follow orders happily, they just don’t have that, well, you know . . .”

“Killer instinct?” Derek’s gaze stayed fixed on the bunker door, while Brad stared wide-eyed at Leo. Men in brown militia uniforms emerged from the bunker to be disarmed by Leo’s troopers, who turned them over to the Greenies.

“Exactly,” Leo declared, pleased to have hit on just the right term. “Why is that?”

Derek continued to study the door, sucking oxygen as the last seconds of truce ticked away, willing her to come out. “Greenies are too cultured,” he told the SuperCat. “We humans are the wild stock.”

“Is that so?” Leo did not sound convinced. “I’m pretty cultured myself.”

Derek laughed dryly, still staring at the door, seeing three men in flight suits appear, an older guy and two teenagers. Still no gunner from Portland. “You were crossed with wild carnivores; they got the genes for Greenies out of a cantaloupe.”

Leo sounded shocked. “Really, a cantaloupe?”

“Just a figure of speech,” Derek assured him, praying for the door to dilate again.

“Still, it explains a lot,” Leo decided. Derek’s heart leaped as he saw the Portland woman emerge from the concealed lock carrying an oxygen bottle, trudging toward the big Bug-mobiles. He waited to see which Bug-mobile she chose, and saw that her came straight to theirs. Good sign.

Taking a big swig of oxygen and hoisting Brad onto his shoulder, he stepped into her path, saying, “Hi, Portland. Glad you came out.”

Stranded in Ares system, facing internment and a war-crimes trial, the failed settler shrugged. “I hardly had a choice.”

“None of us did,” he admitted. “My name’s Derek.”

“I know.” She nodded, not offering hers.

“What’s yours?” He could get it from the Greenies, but he wanted to hear her say it.

“Tammy,” Brad announced loudly. “That is Tammy.”

Tammy smiled, but did not speak. Looking up, Derek thanked the boy

on his shoulder, then handed him to Tammy. "Keep him away from the Greenies if you can."

Tammy took the boy, and climbed onto the covered carrier atop the Bug-mobile, with Brad looking up at her, saying, "I saw a SuperCat!" Rising up on their sixteen legs, the Bugs swiftly bore the prisoners away toward the landing field. Derek had to stay.

The truce had expired. Satisfied that no one else was coming out, Leo signaled to the heavy weapons, and an armor-piercing missile slammed into the bunker door, blowing the outer lock to pieces and blocking the entrance with rubble. If Tammy had been at her gun port, she would have been dead, and Derek would have killed her, since negotiations had revealed the concealed entrance. With Pender and his people sealed in, Leo pulled his troops back before the Osiris missile arrived. Taking shelter in the armored Bug-mobiles, they waited—but nothing happened. Leo glanced at Derek, asking, "What's taking the Greenies?"

Derek nodded toward the landing field, "They are waiting for lift-off."

"Lift-off," Leo arched an eyebrow. "Whatever for?"

"Women and children aboard that transport know the people in Pender's bunker," Derek explained. "Greenies will not blast it until the transport lifts and the people aboard can't hear the bang or see the flash."

Sure enough, the transport lifted from the field behind them, and while it was still a silver spark overhead, climbing for altitude, an Osiris missile falling from orbit obliterated the bunker with a boom so big Derek felt it through his boots, seeing the last of the glass towers shatter into diamond dust, while a mushroom cloud rose up into the rain.

"How like the Greenies!" Leo took a long disgusted snort of oxygen. "They don't mind blasting Pender to pieces, just not in front of the females." SuperCat females were the traditional hunters, the ones who taught the cubs to kill, and were more likely to use fang and claw than the males, who favored automatic weapons. Leo dropped Derek off at the shuttle bay, thanking him again, and pulling a bracelet from his wrist, saying, "This is for your trouble, and the trouble you saved me."

Derek turned it over in his hands, recognizing Home Systems work, a thin gold and jade communicator-cum-companion, voice activated, with a giga-bit memory, and enough microprogramming to play music, translate Bug signals, and teach you Classic French cooking, all at the same time. Mercs like Leo kept their personal savings as flashy but useful items that could be sold or bartered if need be. Derek tried to turn it down, pointing out, "I'm obscenely well paid."

"But not by me," the SuperCat replied, leaping back aboard the armored Bug, and waving good-bye. Leo apologized as he sealed the Bug's turret, "Have to go kill more humans!"

Derek disembarked on the *Harmonia* the huge colony ship used by the Greenies to settle Ares system. *Harmonia* had once been a human ship, the colony-class *Trinidad*, used to settle the near Eridani—but colony ships almost never returned to the Home Systems, and were either cannibalized at their destination, or kept heading outward under new owners. This one not only changed owners but peoples, serving as a habitat in

the Delta Eridani, then being bought by Greenies to colonize Ares system, renamed *Harmonia* to match the planet. At the docking port where humans had once assembled to set foot on new worlds, Derek saw naked Greenie kids gathered at huge view panels to watch the ships coming up from the surface. You could see it on 3V, but kids liked to be there, seeing the passengers get off. Especially Greenie kids. Greenies wanted to do everything first-hand, liking game-playing, group participation, dancing to live music, and making love. To Greenies, 3V entertainment was an oxymoron, dull as counting seams on the bulkhead.

Harmonia, ex-Trinadad, was back to being a habitat, temporary housing for thousands of Greenie colonists, waiting for room on the slowly expanding surface settlements. Oxygen levels were rising rapidly as super-plants spread over the surface, but Greenies were not Gekkos, bred for Mars-like conditions—Greenies needed air as much as humans, otherwise they would not have come to *Harmonia*. Right now a lot of them didn't have much to do, which made Greenies restless. Kids were not the only ones who came to see the shuttle unload. Dressed in skimpy swaths of fabric and ready smiles, a pair of young Greenie women were eyeing the incoming passengers, looking for excitement. Seeing Derek, the taller of them stood up on jade bejeweled toes and called out, "Hey, human, ever had a Greenie?"

"Or two?" suggested her curvy girlfriend.

"Sorry," Derek apologized, never liking to offend friendly young females. "I've got a Greenie girlfriend."

Striking a pose, the tall one put a hand on her hip and tilted her head. "So you know what you are missing."

Her girlfriend added, "If she doesn't treat you right, let us know."

Sex was about the biggest thrill Greenies could imagine, and they liked doing it with ordinary humans. Which some folks found sinister, since any children produced were Greenies—one more part of the great Greenie plot to take over the galaxy. A lot of humans hated Greenies, wanting them all dead—but not Derek. He got on amazingly well with Greenies. How could he not? Greenies were polite, easy going, and compactly built, making most of them smaller than him; while their women were forward and attractive. Besides the algae in their skin, they had altered hormone levels with predispositions toward heliotropism and nudity, plus numerous other "improvements." Hard working and cooperative, Greenies had no interest in religion, politics, nor spectator amusements, and they never got cancer or 3V addiction, nor felt any guilt over sex. In short, there were just enough differences to make normal humans wonder if they were dealing with people, or a biology project gone amok. Or our evolutionary replacements.

His quarters were on J-deck, which was done up like a Japanese garden, a deep misty canyon with elegant dwarf pines growing under a blue hologram sky. Each leaf and rock was set just so, and raked paths connected apartments with balconied entrances, set like Shinto temples in the canyon wall. He awoke each morning to bird calls and the splash of water on stone.

Mia greeted him at the door, rising on her toes to kiss him hello. Her

skimpy costume showed large sweeps of smooth green skin, and her tiny jade tongue slid easily between his lips, feeling small and tingly in his mouth. Her compact body pressed against him in all the right places. Guys joked that if you closed your eyes, Greenie girls felt totally human, especially on the inside—but Derek liked to know who he was kissing. He enjoyed seeing Mia's gold hair lying on her light green neck and cheek. But most of all, he enjoyed Mia's enthusiasm for him, and the way her deft fingers immediately started searching through his clothes for skin. Had he called ahead she would have met him at the shuttle port, and kissed him there—showing the girls at the dockside just how it was done.

Mia had little to do right now, except to enjoy him. She was a mammalian ecologist, waiting for the biosphere below to expand before going to work dirtside. Up here, they could only monitor oxygen levels and make ecosystem projections; pretty dry stuff, but luckily for Mia, they were her life's passion. He handed her the bracelet, saying, "Here, knock yourself out."

Delighted, Mia put it on her wrist, admiring the way the gold and jade shone against her skin. Greenies were not all the same shade, and Mia had light grass-green skin. Though Greenies were almost hairless between the tops of their heads and their pubes, Mia had tiny gold flecks of body hair, which Derek found quite fetching against her light emerald skin. You had to be really close to see them—but that was part of the fun. He told her, "It is from the Home Systems, maybe even Earth."

Her amber eyes went wide. Bred for deep space colonization, few Greenies ever saw the Home Systems. Earth was the closest thing they had to heaven, the far-off home world of their revered and feared creators, full of strange sights and god-like wonders. "Where did you ever find it?"

"Got it off a SuperCat." As soon as he'd seen it, Derek had thought of Mia, since it matched her skin, and because pricey talking jewelry was the sort of toy Greenies would enjoy, but not think to make themselves.

"Sounds dangerous." Mia took him back into her arms, forgetting the expensive microelectronics on her wrist, happy just to have him safe. Being a mammalogist, she knew all about SuperCats, another flashy toy Greenies would never have made themselves.

"And then some." Derek felt a touch of panic at the thought of how he had faced suicidal gunners, walking straight toward that grim bunker. Mia relaxed into him, feeling solid and fragile at the same time, soothing his fears, reminding Derek that he had survived. He told her, "I talked to Big Bill Pender."

"Pender himself?" Mia shivered, shocked at how close he had come to a mass murderer.

"Yep, but he's dead now." Strange that the comfortable, jovial fellow who spared his life in the bunker was now dead, blasted to photons.

"I know," Mia whispered, "I heard it on the Net." Mia could barely imagine killing another thinking being on purpose, much less blowing up a whole bunker full.

"I got a bunch of kids out, adults too," Derek reminded himself, showing that you could do good by taking stupid risks.

Burying her blonde head in his shoulder, she sighed softly, "You are so

sweet and brave, and you deserve a reward." Mia kissed him again, making it plain what that reward would be.

Derek did not complain. Since Mia had moved in, his personal life had gotten happier and livelier, without any apparent downsides. Mia had supreme self-confidence, always showed her feelings, and never feared to speak the truth, taking complete charge of his life by giving Derek whatever he wanted, coping easily with each situation that arose. With three advanced degrees and nothing much to do, Mia found it a snap to fix his meals and manage his affairs, deftly setting out dinner, rice balls and vat-grown sushi, accompanied by a warm bottle of saki. Greenies got off on "authentic" Earth cuisine, though Mia refused to eat vertebrate flesh unless it was vat-cultured. Derek relaxed, finally feeling like the conquering hero—too bad he had to go back down in a couple of dozen hours and do it all again.

After dinner, Mia disposed of the dishes and settled into his lap, so they could both drink saki from the same cup. Derek told her, "I talked to a woman too."

"A human woman?" Mia asked, playfully starting to undo his sweaty tunic, knowing full well what he meant.

"From Old Earth." Derek smelled lilac perfume wafting out of the jade hollow between Mia's breasts.

Mia arched a blonde eyebrow. "I never met someone from Earth."

"Straight from Portland, Oregon, but she was born in Eugene."

"Really?" These were mythical places to Mia, ancient homes of her creators—just talking about them excited her. Greenies never had to ask themselves, "Where did we come from?"—knowing the date and place where they were first created, down to the minute. Squirming pleasantly in his lap, Mia asked, "What was the Earthwoman doing here?"

Tammy was probably asking herself that very question, sitting in orbital detention light years from Eugene, while Derek drank warm tangy saki with a semi-nude mammalogist curled in his lap. "She was a door gunner with an assault-cannon."

"How ghastly!" Mia shrank back, no longer the least excited, repulsed at the thought of anti-personnel weapons. Greenie women would not touch a killing machine, nor be with a male who did—the main reason why Derek carried nothing more deadly than a sleep grenade. Despite her three degrees, Mia could not comprehend why humans invented weapons to begin with, accepting it as some unexplainable original sin of her creators. She asked, "Are all human females so ferocious?"

"She didn't seem ferocious." Maybe Tammy *was* though; maybe, to Mia, all true humans were unspeakably savage. "She was guarding the bunker door, the first place they blasted. If I hadn't talked her out, she would be dead now."

Mia nodded gravely, "And she put down her assault cannon?"

Derek nodded. "That was part of the deal." Prisoners were not allowed personal artillery.

Glad to hear the gun was gone, Mia snuggled back up against him, saying, "You are such a good man."

"Why so?" Mia's total rejection of violence always made Derek feel like

a terrible beast, knowing that she would rather die than harm another thinking being, leaving her defenseless against people like Pender who wanted all Greenies killed, sight unseen. Would knowing Mia have changed Pender's mind? Probably not.

Mia looped light green arms around his neck, her gold hair falling half across her smiling face. "You risk your life for others. You bring me presents, and you are so thoughtful."

Too thoughtful at times. Soon Mia was going dirtside to live an ecologist's dream, creating a balanced planetary ecosystem teeming with plants and animals. By then, Derek's work dirtside would be done, and he would go back to being a vacuum hand. So was he merely a pleasant interlude to Mia, before the serious business of life began? A sort of in-depth xenobiology experiment? Or maybe just a pet she could fuck? Greenie women could control conception, and she was choosing not to breed by him. He cocked an eyebrow, asking, "As good as a Greenie?"

"No," Mia laughed at the thought, "you are not like a Greenie in the least." Undoing his tunic, she played with his chest hairs, saying, "And I like that. I like that a lot." Leaning down, she licked the sweat off his chest with her small green tongue. Mia especially liked the taste of him, saying he was wild and salty, while Greenie sweat was designed to be bland and inoffensive. "I really love that you are human."

"Do you?" Derek stripped the fabric off her slim light-green torso, pressing Mia's warm body against his bare chest, knowing that this smart, dedicated mammalian ecologist would do pretty much whatever he wanted—so long as it was physiologically possible. She enthusiastically explored his favorite quirks and fantasies. Being a devoted mammalogist, Mia vastly enjoyed making love to the most fearsome mammal in the known universe, thrilling to the feel of his savage power inside her. What true scientist could resist being so intimate with her subject? He whispered, "Do you like making love to a dangerous beast?" The most dangerous beast. "Is that it?"

"A little," Mia laughed, clearly liking how he manhandled her. Even at half his weight, her calm sure confidence came off like a challenge, begging him to puncture her smug Greenie superiority.

Taking firm hold of her buttock, Derek suggested, "Perhaps you would prefer a SuperCat?"

"Ugh, too hairy," Mia protested, "and those horrid teeth! They are real beasts, who do not know good from evil. You know good and evil, yet you choose good. That delights me."

Derek too. He kissed her soft acquiescent mouth, at the same time sliding out of his trousers. When he released her tongue, Mia whispered, "What is her name?"

"Who?" He kicked his pants onto the tatami deck.

Mia wiggled atop him, her groin grinding rhythmically against his. "This Earthwoman, from Portland."

He never knew what Greenies would say next. "Her name is Tammy."

Mia grinned, so excited by his seeing an Earthwoman she had to drag Tammy into bed with them, metaphorically at least. "Did you make love to Tammy?"

"No time." Derek could barely believe they were discussing this. Tammy had been hard put to even talk to him; at best, he hoped to hire her to help with his job.

"You will." Mia dismissed his protest; after all, he was only human, and a man at that. Parting her thighs, she sank down onto him, drawing him deep into her. Maybe Greenies were the same under the skin. Mia's head might be wired wildly different, and her skin might turn sunlight into blood sugar, but, on the inside, she felt just like a woman. Or so Derek supposed—never having done this with a human female.

Portland Woman

Greenies needed no death penalty, since they never killed each other, and genocide was such a preposterous concept they had no laws against it. So the trial took place on the surface, on a lowland LZ, under military law, with Leo for a judge. The defendants were the last to leave Pender's bunker, the trio in flight suits and Tammy, who turned out to be on Pender's staff, an operations assistant doubling as a door-gunner. All were charged with murdering more than ten thousand Gekko civilians in a nuclear strike near the end of the fighting. The older man had piloted the strike craft, and his two teenage sons had served as weapons officer and crew chief. Tammy's office had given the order.

Liking to work outdoors, Leo held the trial in a deep green valley floored by stands of elephant grass and tall tree ferns—a hint of what Harmonia would be like when terraforming was complete. Brightly colored birds called from atop the tree ferns. Derek refused to sit on the jury, so it was made up of SuperChimps, SuperCats, and Greenie males—since no female could vote for death. Learning that Derek would not serve on the jury, Leo asked, "Will you be defense attorney then?"

Derek shook his head. "That would be racist." Why have him do it, just because he was human? Derek had no training as a lawyer, and no particular sympathy for Pender's people. Nor for Gekkos, so far as that goes. Let some earnest young Greenie try to get them off.

Tammy immediately volunteered, stepping up and saying to the SuperCat, "I will defend myself and the others—if they want me."

Prosecutors objected, claiming, "It creates conflict of interests for the defense attorney to be a co-defendant." The prosecutors were Gekkos. Not real ones, who could not tolerate the humid oxygen-rich atmosphere of the lowlands; instead, they appeared as holograms beamed down from orbit—grim humanoid bio-constructs, stretched-out versions of Greenies with horny skin, big bald heads, and barrel chests; bred for dry, low-g, low-oxygen worlds, like Harmonia was before real humans arrived. The Gekkos suggested, "Have the unindicted human do it."

They meant Derek, who had already refused. Leo turned to look Tammy over, lazily eyeing the Earthwoman in her worn militia uniform. Disarmed, defeated, but not the least downcast, Tammy looked calmly back at the SuperCat, not afraid to defend herself, against him, or anyone. Leo

liked what he saw, saying, "Charges against you are dismissed without prejudice. Prosecutors may try to revive them before another judge—but not me. Until then, do your best. Since this is your first case, I'm sure the prosecution will agree to give you leeway. . . ." He glanced at the Gekkos.

"Dismissed?" Speed-of-light lag made the hologram prosecutors seem slow and insensitive, as well as insubstantial. "This human is a dangerous war criminal, responsible for the deaths of thousands of sentient beings. . . ."

"So you say." Leo yawned, showing off gleaming canines. "But this human was not aboard the strike craft, and not in the chain-of-command, since Pender gave the launch order himself. . . ."

"And he never held a staff vote," Derek volunteered, though he only had Pender's word on that.

"These are all points to be proven," the Gekkos insisted, outraged at any attempt to shortcut justice. When Derek's comments arrived, the Gekkos added, "Who is he to talk?"

"You just tried to make him defense attorney," Leo pointed out. Giving another toothy yawn, the SuperCat told his court, "Case against the defense attorney is dismissed. Intercepts show Pender gave the launch order, and the strike craft carried it out. This court has neither the time nor patience to prove things everyone knows—stick to points in dispute."

The Gekkos objected again, but Leo overruled them, then turned back to Tammy, smiling broadly, telling her, "No Greenie is going to sentence a defenseless female to death anyway. So do your damnedest, and if you screw up, the court will understand, being amateurs ourselves."

Tammy thanked him and went to consult with her former co-conspirators. When she was done, Leo let the holos lead off, describing the strike in some detail, time, location, and numbers killed—stressing that most of the dead were infants and females. Then the chief prosecutor went from defendant to defendant, asking each one what he had done. The pilot tried to take all the responsibility himself, knowing he was dead, but hoping to save his sons, declaring adamantly, "I alone got the orders, and I alone carried out the strike."

Nobody much believed the desperate father, but the hologram Gekko happily pocketed the abject confession, then turned to the weapons officer, asking about the strike craft's armament, getting a complete description of the Artemis air-to-surface missile, and its antimatter warhead. Then the Gekko asked, "Did you know there were non-combatants within the kill radius?"

Nodding, the teenager admitted that he did, and that he armed and aimed the missile anyway, adding rather lamely, "We were told they were not people."

"By who?" demanded the indignant Gekko.

Shrugging, the boy carefully avoided looking at his anguished father. "Everyone."

Grimacing, the Gekko went on to get similar answers from the young crew chief, concluding his case. Which made it Tammy's turn. Picking the pilot to start with, she asked about the general military situation, showing that the human settlers were outnumbered more than a hundred to

one, and losing badly. "Gekkos had us surrounded and pinned down, suffering steady casualties. Gekkos moved easily over the surface, while we huddled in our bunkers, or went about in vehicles, making ourselves ready targets. . . ."

Prosecutors objected, arguing that military considerations had nothing to do with the murder of non-combatants. Leo casually overruled them; at best, the SuperCat considered the trial a tedious evasion of responsibility, but he meant for everyone to have their say. "Go on," he instructed Tammy, "though I doubt this line of testimony will do you any good."

Thanking Leo, Tammy got the pilot to describe the military installations in the target city, showing that the Gekko guerrilla bands bleeding the settler militia were based among non-combatants. But the Gekko prosecutor responded by asking if the strike craft carried smart-munitions, which the weapons officer admitted it did. "Then why did you not use them?" asked the Gekko. "Confining the strike to military targets."

"Pender ordered us to use the Artemis," replied the pilot. Clearly, Pender had wanted a high body count—which was now likely to cost the strike team their lives. Summing up the prosecution's case, the hologram Gekko pointed out that the dead included hundreds of humans as well, internees and POWs, held under humane conditions. Unlike Pender's people, the Gekkos had taken prisoners and treated them reasonably well, until other humans obliterated both them and the Gekkos.

Tammy finished up with a passionate plea for mercy, claiming that the killing could stop here, if they were willing to take a risk for peace. Pender was dead, and his cause was dead. Harmonia was going to the Greenies—punishing the defeated would not make a difference. Derek's heart went out to her, facing an Alice in Wonderland jury of brainy apes, toothy felines, and green-skinned men. He could tell Tammy had seen her fill of fighting; two light centuries from home, and one of only two humans on Harmonia who were not either under capital indictment or cowering in caves and bunkers, waiting for Greenies and SuperCats to dig them out. Her plea for peace and forgiveness reminded Derek of Mia. His Greenie girlfriend had said the same exact things when they first got together, wishing to personally plead with Pender for a cease-fire—not knowing that the Humanists would have shot her out of hand. For some people, humanity was just skin-deep. Despite Tammy's Portland-white skin and militia uniform—complete with an empty holster strapped to her thigh—there was more similarity between her and Mia than the Humanists, or even a lot of Greenies, would admit. Defeat had wrung all the settler arrogance out of Tammy, making her sound like little blonde-green Mia; smart, open, honest, and utterly helpless in the face of force.

Tammy must have moved the Greenies on the jury too, because they acquitted the teenage crew chief—refusing to put to death someone who had merely been along for the ride. His father and brother were not so lucky. Everyone waited glumly while the verdict was virtually appealed to an off-planet court—in this case the officers of the armed merchant cruiser *Eclipse*, sitting in a special courts martial. Not even the Gekkos were happy, having seen Tammy and the crew chief get off—and not trusting the naval officers, most of whom were human.

Verdicts came back confirmed, much to the Gekkos' surprise. Derek expected it, knowing naval officers had scant sympathy for the Humanist militia—bungling amateurs who gave war a bad name. Gekkos made the common mistake of assuming that all humans were the same.

Judge Leo carried the sentences out personally. Life and death were all that mattered to a SuperCat, and he would never have sat in judgment if someone else was going to execute the sentence. What would be the point? He asked the father how he wanted it done. Lips drawn, the human replied that he wanted his son to die first, "But I don't want to see it."

Leo understood, telling him, "Say your good-byes." Which the dad did, first to the crew chief, then to the son who would die. Then the father watched his son obey his final order, marching off without a misstep, disappearing behind a screen of tree ferns, where Leo shot him.

When Leo came for the father, the human said a final good-bye to the Gekkos. "I'm glad we killed every one of you assholes."

Watching the father go, Derek knew how the man felt. Ceremoniously shooting them for destroying a smallish city did seem ludicrous, since humans had gone on to kill every Gekko on the planet. Vastly outnumbered, and clinging to a few dwindling isolated settlements, Pender's people knew that even antimatter warheads would not win for them—so the Humanists countered with their ultimate weapon. When the settlers first arrived after two centuries in transit and found Harmonia inhabited by Gekkos, plans for terraforming the planet were put on hold. Facing complete defeat, Pender ordered the terraforming into immediate operation. Deep-space teams at the edge of Ares system crashed water ice comets rich in CO₂ into Harmonia, producing surface water, rain, and greenhouse gases. At the same time, Pender's biotechs released superplants into the thicker wetter atmosphere, sending oxygen levels soaring. Mounting oxygen and humidity killed all the Gekkos that didn't flee off-planet. *Homo sapiens* had again come out on top, against daunting odds, and on alien ground. Proving that humans were a dangerous species to tangle with—for those few that did not already know.

Tammy took away the surviving teenager, acquitted of all charges, but still rendered a homeless orphan by the courts. Derek let her go without a word, guessing that this was not the moment to offer her a job working for the new masters of Harmonia.

He caught up with Tammy in orbit, where settler families waited to be shipped outsystem. Trust Greenies to design the perfect transit camp, turning the main hold of a C-class freighter into a hologram tropical isle, complete with warm sunlight, sea breezes, and righteous waves. Folks lived in thatched treehouses and palm huts, while a dropshaft in the island's center led to more standard decks—for those who tired of paradise. Tammy sat on the beach staring out to sea, having traded her militia uniform for a gaudy sarong and a hibiscus blossom tucked behind her ear. Other refugees lounged about in various states of undress, and children splashed in the surf beneath a bright hologram sky—including Brad, who Tammy turned out to be watching. Someone upwind was roasting a pig, while teenagers lovingly smoothed and sanded balsawood surfboards.

Sitting down in the hot sand beside Tammy, he watched a blue breaker slam into the beach, sending glittering spray flying through warm tropical air. Out of the corner of his eye, he noted Tammy had nicely rounded breasts, even if they weren't green. "Is this what Portland is like?"

Laughing, Tammy looked over at him, the first time he had coaxed more than a smile out of her. "No, this is not Portland. Not even close."

"Really?" The Charter of Universal Rights said that internees must be kept in conditions "approximating" their home world—and Greenies scrupulously obeyed such conventions, not wanting to deny anyone their rights. "Earth is not like this?"

"Parts of it are." Tammy's smile faded, and she stared evenly at him, an intense questioning look that surprised Derek—it seemed like Tammy needed something from him, but would not say what. Which Derek found strange. Greenie females were very upfront about their needs; if they wanted something they said so. All Tammy said was, "What are you doing here?"

Good question. Derek was not sure what he was doing, but he did want to see more of Tammy, so he tried to start on a positive note. "You were amazing, standing up to the court like you did, saving that boy's life. . . ."

"But not his father and brother." Tammy sounded bitter, looking back at Brad, another orphan. By utterly wiping out the Gekkos, Pender and company had assured that the blame would forever fall on Tammy's people.

"You did wonderfully." Derek meant it; he had talked to Tammy on a whim, but everything she did since drew him in. Her plea for peace, her caring for homeless kids, her bravery before armed SuperCats. "Leo would have killed that boy, as easily as the others. You saved him, when I was afraid to even try."

"You, afraid?" Tammy's smile returned, as if she could not really believe him. "I thought you were the nerveless negotiator who walked unarmed into the muzzles of machine cannon."

"Only in my spare time," Derek explained. "Normally I'm a vacuum hand, a pilot. Greenies grabbed me for this job because I was the only human they could easily get a hold of."

"Yet you took the job," Tammy reminded him, "idiotically going into grave danger just to save complete strangers."

And winning points with Tammy. Derek could tell by how her smile widened, making this the moment to ask. "Idiotically? I hope not, because I fancied you might join me."

"Join you?" Taken aback, Tammy acted like she had started to trust him, but now was not sure. "Working for Greenies?"

"*Photo sapiens* do pay me," Derek admitted, "but that's not why I do it." He nodded toward Brad, splashing in the surf with the other children. "That's who I do it for—there are still a lot of innocents dirtside, and a woman would be very helpful in getting them out safely, especially an Earthwoman."

Tammy looked at him with that same questioning stare, like she wanted something from him—but all she said was, "Do you know how hard it is to lose everything? To see good friends blown to bits for no reason?"

Looking out to sea, Tammy watched hydraulically produced waves roll out of the hologram horizon that hid her prison wall. "This all started out as a grand adventure, founding a new world beyond the stars—but when we got here someone else had moved in, and no one would honor our claim." Gekkos had gotten in ahead of the human colonists, and there was no law to make them leave. Human attempts to assert their centuries-old claim had led to friction, then fighting, and finally genocide. "Sure it's all our fault, but what could we do? Our ships were one-way jobs, built to be cannibalized at our destination, so we couldn't even go home. Those of us who opposed fighting were dragged in anyway, once the killing began. I started by organizing peace vigils, and ended up as a door-gunner—don't think that was easy."

Hunched up, her arms around her legs, she laid her head down on her bare knees, looking back over at him, saying, "Now we're defeated, despised, and deported, and it will all go to the Greenies." Surviving Gekkos had sold their now useless claim on Harmonia to the Greenies, and there was scant support for letting the human settlers keep a planet they had acquired by mass-murder. "Greenies are going to just waltz in and take what we made, because they are so good and we are so evil."

Derek agreed, Greenie goodness could get to you—witness this island-paradise-cum-prison. Greenies were adept at making you feel grateful for doing what they wanted. "I don't think you are evil," he told Tammy, "only human. That's why I offered you the job—this is something that must be done by *humans*. If Greenies could do it, we wouldn't be having this talk."

Still staring straight at him, Tammy told him tersely, "I can't betray my people."

"I'm asking you to help save them," Derek pointed out.

Again he got that questioning look. By now, Mia would have said what she wanted—and then some. Tammy just said, "I'll work for you, but not for Greenies. The first time I have to take orders from a Greenie—I'm gone."

"Absolutely," Derek agreed. He could talk to the Greenies, being very good at that.

"And don't try to pump me for info," Tammy warned him. "I will talk people into coming out, but I won't help kill them. Understood?"

Derek nodded. "Understood."

Tammy looked hard at him. "No hypno-probes. No brain scans."

"I'm not even wired for lie detection," Derek reminded her. He liked the give-and-take of talking to Tammy, enjoying an edge you never got with Greenies. With Mia, everything was so pleasantly simple, that were it not for her green skin and weird way of thinking, there would be no mystery at all. With Tammy, it was a challenge just to get agreement, before she piled on more bizarre conditions. "We go dirtside at 1630 hours tomorrow. Can you be ready?"

"Sure." It was not as if Tammy had much to do here. Nor did she bother to ask about the pay—when you were being paid to get out of jail, how much hardly mattered.

Getting up to go, Derek surveyed the white sweep of tropical beach edged with treehouse cabanas. "So this is not Portland?"

"More like Paradise Island," Tammy told him. "Minus the holo-rides, dance arenas, sex-clubs, and love grottos."

Earth sounded like an amazing place. He remembered Tammy saying that she had been to Paradise Island with her boyfriend—and liked it a lot. He asked, "Do you still have the boyfriend?"

"Sure." Tammy nonchalantly watched his reaction, but by now, Derek was enough of a negotiator not to show disappointment. "Back in Portland," she added, making them both laugh. Oregon was so far off that laser-mail took four hundred years to get a reply. He left before she could ask if he had a girlfriend.

All he told Mia was that he had hired Tammy. His Greenie girlfriend was pleased, saying her good-bye to him on the temple porch of their bonsai garden apartment, with wind chimes tinkling overhead. "Be careful," Mia pleaded, "I'm not done with you. And take care of Tammy too."

"Tammy?" He was surprised by her concern for Pender's former aide.

"Yes. Tammy will be alone among men and weapons. She will need a good man to watch over her, and you are the best I know." Mia gave him another kiss, then let him go.

Billions of years ago, when Ares system was still forming, a Rhode Island-sized rock had slammed into Harmonia's northern hemisphere, carving out the Hyperborian Depression, sub-polar lowlands a thousand klicks across. Ringed by dry ragged, highlands, the lowlands were slowly filling with rain water that would one day submerge everything but the central volcanic peak thrust high up into the thin air. Glass remnants of Gekko towns shone amid silent green swamps and marshes inhabited by herds of hippos who were busily converting the greenery into fish food and fertilizer. Humans had brought all sorts of useful animals with them to fill out Harmonia's slowly emerging ecology, though Greenies would now tailor the world to their tastes, and Mia would be the one coming down to catalogue the hippo herds.

But first the swamps must be made safe for Greenies. That was for Leo and Derek to do, and now Tammy. Riding down on the shuttle, Derek sat beside his new teammate, excitedly listening to stories from Earth. So much time, so many wonders. How strange that most of human existence had been confined to that one tiny planet. He asked Tammy, "Why did you leave?"

"There are forty billion people in the solar system, most of them on Earth," Tammy explained. "Crowds like that can be lonely. I wanted to live on a world like Earth was when there were not so many of us."

And now they were going down to root the last human remnants out of Harmonia. Tammy sighed, saying, "Weird thing is, I still get laser-mail from my sister Mary, who must be two hundred years older than me by now. It was all sent when Mary was in her twenties, birth announcements, Christmas greetings, that sort of thing—nothing very personal. Sometimes I miss Portland, but there isn't a lot you can do with a doctorate in Humanities, except leave the planet."

"You have a doctorate in Humanism?" Derek was shocked to discover they gave degrees in intolerance and racial superiority.

His surprise amused Tammy. "Humanism and the Humanities are to-

tally different. My specialty was Dead Languages—Latin, Sumerian, Japanese, that sort of thing."

Fascinated, Derek asked, "So, do you speak English?"

Tammy smiled. "All my life."

"Say something in English," he suggested. Many of the settler holdouts came from North America, and English would be a good way of proving she was not a Greenie.

Tammy said something short and unintelligible, but her quaint accent made it sound fetching, even romantic. Derek asked, "What does that mean?"

Her smile turned mischievous, and Tammy told him, "I asked, do you have a girlfriend?"

Suddenly, Tammy's English sentence didn't sound so quaint and fetching. Mia was not due down from orbit for days, so a chance meeting was unlikely, but Derek could not lie to Tammy, not after her sometimes painful honesty. Trying to hide behind a nonchalant grin, he told her, "Only if you count Greenies."

Tammy's smile faded, and Derek saw that he had lost something in her eyes by sleeping with a Greenie. "Her name is Mia. But I doubt she considers me her 'boyfriend'—not the way humans think of it. . . ."

Tammy would not even look at him, totally uninterested in the love life of Greenies. They had a cold, silent planetfall, sitting side by side and saying nothing.

Orbital scans showed humans scattered throughout the Hyperborian Depression, with solid patches in the marsh supporting farm plots, producing melons, squash, patches of corn, pigs, and chickens. None of which worried the Greenies much, since the whole swamp was slowly becoming a sea bottom. Why dig people out of a place that would soon be underwater? What worried the Greenies was a water-tight bunker complex dug into the base of the central massif, and signs of fortifications farther up.

Leo's light armored battalion landed near the biggest bunker entrance, carving out an LZ with wide zones of fire. No one opposed them. In fact, Derek got the impression that the swarm of armored infantry and turreted Bug-mobiles sent everyone scurrying for cover. Having said virtually nothing since planetfall, he and Tammy approached the main bunker, a steel blast-shield dug into a green hillside, with **ELVIS SAVES** spray-painted in English above the entrance. His electronic bug scurried ahead of them.

Young women wearing long print dresses, beehive hairdos, and black eye shadow greeted them at the bunker door, looking askance at Tammy in her brown militia uniform, beneath body armor that read, **DO NOT SHOOT THIS WOMAN!** Tammy shook her head and grinned for the first time since that frosty fall from orbit. "Presleites! Good luck! You're going to wish you were dealing with Pender."

"What do you mean?" Derek asked warily, pleased to have Tammy talking again.

"You'll see." Tammy shook her head. "Church of Elvis, so just watch your back."

Smiling women ushered them into the neatly carpeted bunker, showing a cold shoulder to Tammy. Inside was a hologram-maze of long fluorescent corridors lined with numbered rooms, all done in the same white-and-gold

motif, with heavy white drapes where the windows should be. Lower levels were reached by boxy elevators. Unable to tell if this was some illusionary defense, Derek asked Tammy, "Is this typical Earth-style architecture?"

"From a zillion years ago," Tammy told him. "This is programmed to resemble a Las Vegas hotel casino in early post-atomic Nevada. Before the state was made into a waste dump."

"Really?" That explained the numbered rooms, but not the annoying music in the elevators. "What was Las Vegas?"

"Resort in the desert—don't ask me why. Presleites adore this style of architecture, which has a sort of energetic charm," Tammy admitted. "Living like this would drive normal folks crazy, but it doesn't seem to bother them much."

Led into an inner bedroom with the same white-on-white motif, Derek was confronted by a middle-aged matriarch wearing a blue sheath dress beneath a black bouffant hairdo. Studying them from under her heavy eye shadow, the woman introduced herself as Ginger, asking suspiciously, "Which side are you on?"

"Neither," Derek announced hopefully.

Women around him smiled wide, and voiced a happy, "Hallelujah!"

"Praise the King. We have been waiting for someone to come to their senses," Ginger explained. "When we saw her we were afraid you might be Humanists."

"Funny, I thought *you* would be Humanists," Derek admitted.

"Hell, no! Elvis didn't believe in race war. His only begotten daughter married Saint Michael, who bleached his own skin, showing it was no shame to be any color—even white."

Women around Derek chimed in with another chorus of, "Praise the King."

Derek turned to Tammy. "What are they saying?"

Tammy shook her head. "Too hard to explain. But these people gave Pender no help at all. They are way too wrapped up in their religion to worry about the Gekkos, or anything else."

Derek believed it, but the Greenies wanted the whole central massif evacuated and combed for weapons. Nor did Derek blame them, since orbital surveys indicated a tunnel complex that could hold enough warheads to blow a hole in the thin atmosphere and scatter radioactive debris all over the planet. Greenies were courteous, but not crazy.

Of course, the Presleites did not see it that way. "We have done nothing," Ginger complained. "We can't just give up our homes to Greenies."

"You can't stop them," Derek pointed out. Greenies were going to get what they wanted, even if Leo had to dig the humans out of their tunnels.

"Really?" Batting black lashes, Ginger smiled to her companions, who drew plastic stingers out of their print dresses. Negotiations had taken an alarming turn for the worse, and Ginger primly informed him, "Hating war doesn't make us pushovers."

Apparently not. Staring into the round black muzzles of the stingers, Derek was quick to point out that shooting him would do no one any good.

"Shoot you?" Ginger acted like the thought had never entered her head. "You have earned an audience with the King. These stingers are just to

show we are serious. Some people think polite tolerance is a sign of weakness." Ginger nodded at Tammy, to show who she meant.

Tammy merely shrugged, taking no responsibility for Presleite opinions. Just when Derek thought things could not get any stranger, a holo flickered into being in front of him, a handsome dark-haired young man, wearing a sparkling white and gold suit, with a wide belt and a huge golden buckle. He had lively blue eyes and an engaging smile, and his appearance was greeted by another round of, "Praise the King!"

Bowing to his audience, the hologram winked at Ginger as he straightened up, then swung about on his blue suede shoes, saying to Derek, "Howdy, son. Don't worry, these gals won't drill you—they're just my fan club. The pistols are only for protection."

Derek assured the holo that no one need fear him.

The King's virtual grin widened. "Pleased to hear you come in peace."

"Peace is my profession," Derek agreed cheerfully.

"So you talk to both sides?" asked the King.

"I try." Derek knew he was speaking to a sophisticated program of some sort, broadcast from deeper in the bunker—but he was willing to talk to empty bulkheads if it would avert killing.

Turning serious, the King asked, "And do the Greenies say these folks got to go?"

Derek nodded. "At least until this area can be thoroughly searched for contraband." Code intercepts had revealed that Pender had been working on a doomsday device—fitting his personality perfectly.

"When your search is done, will they be allowed back?" asked the virtual Elvis.

"If it were up to me, they would be." Derek could not answer for the Greenies.

"I bet it would." The King's smile broadened. "And in that case, what if I just gave you this place?"

"Give it to me?" Derek imagined he had misheard the holo.

"If I just gave it to you, the Greenies wouldn't take it away. Would they? You're pretty well in with them?"

"Maybe," Derek admitted. Greenies ran the planet, yet were bound by the Charter of Universal Rights to respect claims by other races. In theory, anyone who did not aid Pender was as good as a Greenie. Whether that applied to holo-programs modeled on long-dead singers was another issue, but juries of bioconstructs had notoriously generous notions of what was "natural."

"And you would you let these people live here?" Elvis asked, as his fan club shyly lowered their pistols, smiling to show their dimples.

"Of course, but . . ."

"Then nothing could be simpler," the King declared. "You seem a decent man, not overly scared by women or guns."

"For one thing," Derek protested, "I don't want the responsibility."

"Of course not." Elvis laughed, shaking his dark locks. "What fool wants responsibility? Sane folks run like hell from it. But take it from the King, sometimes you gotta face the music."

Elvis took them on a virtual tour of the bunker, followed by his fan club,

turning off the hologram Vegas Hilton, to reveal living quarters, hydroponics, recycling, power supply, and families hiding in blast shelters—but no big stock of weapons, except for the personal sidearms that most adult Presleites carried, just to be safe. “An armed society is a polite society,” the King explained amiably.

Satisfied that this was all true, Derek put in a call to Leo, arranging a peaceful evacuation. For which the hologram deity thanked him profusely, and zip-signaled a contract for Leo to witness, turning the whole central massif over to Derek, along with all its contents—then, in a blink, the King disappeared. Elvis had left the bunker.

While Leo’s battalion searched the lower reaches of the mountain, Derek took Tammy upslope to check out the command complex at the summit, including an auxiliary reactor, big blast-shelters, and what looked like a launch silo. For that, they needed oxygen, since the Presleite tunnels did not connect to the complex above, and they would be climbing into a dead zone, where the air was still too thin to support life. Pretty appropriate, since the coolness between them continued. He had not heard a kind word from Tammy since he had told her about Mia; which he might have expected, but still did not enjoy. Accustomed to Greenie girls, Derek had been lulled into thinking that Tammy might have a similar easy attitude. No such luck.

Derek had to be satisfied by inspecting his new digs, with his bug crawling ahead of him, searching for signs of trouble. If the Presleites had not killed any Gekkos to get this mountain, Greenie courts would likely award it to him. And Derek saw absolutely no sign of Gekkos on the mountain, which was only slowly becoming habitable as the oxygen level rose. The nearest glass ruins were shining dots far out across the green swampland, on what would one day be sea bottom.

His bug saw no sign of life in the complex atop the mountain, which seemed to be on lock-down mode. Power emissions were minimal, and most of the tunnels lacked life-support, standing with ports gaping open atop an almost-airless mountain stuck up into the frigid stratosphere. At the top, Derek called down to Leo, saying he was checking out his high castle. Leo gave him a go, and Derek sent in his bug ahead of them. Tammy closed the ports behind them, turning on the lights and air.

Derek found his new digs impressive, going to the command deck and getting the 3V tour. It had obviously not been built by the Presleites, but it was not Gekko work either, and the King’s claim to the mountain went all the way to the summit. So long as the place was truly abandoned, and they found nothing to link it to Pender, this high-tech castle was as good as his, to do with as he pleased. Though what he really wanted was a ship to pilot. Who could he find to swap a starship for a mountain-top retreat?

3V showed the silo to be empty, but Derek decided on a visual check. Heavy blast-shielding allowed Greenies in orbit to “see” the buried silo, but not what was inside. Tammy led him to the silo lock, and equalized pressures, flooding the huge shaft with breathable air. He sent his bug in ahead.

As he expected, the silo was not empty—that would have made things too easy. But there was no doomsday device either, thank heaven. Crouched at the bottom of the shaft was a gravity drive starship, a sleek

fast Fornax Skylark, ready to leap into orbit. Just the sort of ship he wanted. Way too good to be true.

Signaling Tammy to step back, Derek decided to alert Leo on a secure channel. This silo had to be sealed tight and escape into space cut off, before anyone dared approach that ship. Recalling his bug, he hissed to Tammy, "Now's when we call in Leo's people."

"No, I don't think so," Tammy replied evenly. Derek turned in surprise, and saw that Tammy was holding a gun on him, which dear sweet Mia would never have done. He could barely believe it, but a plastic fire-and-forget stinger had somehow materialized in her hand. Derek opened his mouth to protest, but before he could get a word out, Tammy shot him.

Thor's Hammer

Derek awoke in a sealed cubicle aboard ship, wearing a slave collar. His sleep grenade and hypo-rings were gone. There was absolutely no light—but he didn't need x1-10,000 night vision zoom lenses to know he was in a sealed box. His comlink had vanished, but he still had the pilot's navigation chip embedded in his skull. Inertial sensors showed Derek was accelerating at about 20-gs, something you could only do in a fast starship, like the Fornax Skylark he had seen hiding in the shaft. Simple logic said that he was aboard that ship, headed rapidly outsystem. Pity he waited so late to resort to logic.

Fingering his slave collar, he found it was standard issue, fitted for tracking, paralysis, lie detection, emotional motivation, and who knows what else? There were no ill effects from the stinger, so the fire-and-forget hornet must have been set on SLEEP. Such a stinger could just as easily have killed him, or put him in a coma. Tammy, it seemed, wanted him alive and conscious—for the moment, at least. He remembered how she had stared at him over the sights, not angry, or gleeful, just giving him that same even look she shown him in Pender's bunker, when she first pulled her head out of the assault-cannon's sighting hood. Greenies had warned him that Earthwomen were dangerous, but it took Tammy to convince him.

He told his nav-chip to work out pursuit vectors, assuming all available vessels gave chase as soon as the Skylark burst out of the silo. Results were not good. Greenies had nothing that could catch it, just a couple of interstellar yachts converted to escorts that might do 10-gs at a stretch. Backing up the Greenies was the armed merchant cruiser *Eclipse*, a naval vessel with the legs to run down the Skylark—but not anytime soon. *Eclipse* had been nosing about upsun for signs of slavers or Humanist hold-outs, while the Skylark was going like lightning in the opposite direction. Even if *Eclipse* dropped everything to pursue, half of Tartarus system lay between them, which would mean a long stern chase into the vastness of interstellar space.

Of course, no one might be chasing them at all. Whoever was running this ship were bound to be diehard Humanists. Greenies and the Navy might figure that Harmonia system was far better off without such fa-

natics, and any attempt at pursuit would smack too much of wanting them back. Leaving Derek an unwilling passenger on a ship full of lunatic pariahs headed who knows where.

Presently, his door dilated and Tammy appeared, a smirk on her face, casually holding a slave-remote in place of the stinger. "Sorry to put you through this," she told him, "but it couldn't be helped."

"Oh, really?" Derek could easily have avoided all this.

"Don't act so pure," Tammy snorted. "All the time you were romancing me, you were fucking a Greenie."

"You should try it sometime," Derek suggested. A good Greenie-fuck might be just what Tammy needed, to help her loosen up a bit, and maybe get to know the neighbors.

"Come with me," she told him, motioning with the remote. "Or I will have you carried."

Derek went gladly, eager to get out of the shielded cell and see what was happening. As soon as he left the cubicle, systems traffic confirmed his guesses. Greenies had not even bothered to give chase, but *Eclipse* was shaping to match orbits deep in interstellar space, with billions of kilometers to make up, leaving Derek pretty much on his own for the moment. Tammy ushered him into the Skylark's salon, which was tuned to a view of tall sandstone spires and vast distances. High overhead was a hologram Sol, and the cabin deck was made to look like the adobe roof of a pueblo sweat lodge, covered with bright colored rugs, and sitting atop a lonely mesa.

Three men in brown Humanist militia uniforms sat atop the sweat lodge in deck chairs molded to their bodies, ignoring the hologram vistas around them, glaring at Derek instead. They did not look defeated, just mean. All three of them had recoilless machine pistols at their hips, which seemed a bit much millions of kilometers from the nearest threat. One asked curtly, "What is he doing here?"

Tammy shrugged, saying, "I wanted him to see."

"Whatever for?" demanded the militia man, dramatically resting his hand on his holster, though the nearest Greenie was by now millions of klicks away, and the Gekkos were mostly dead.

"I have hopes for him." Tammy smiled at Derek as she said it, then added, "And this far from home, we need all the help we can get,"

"We'll be bringing in Presleites next," protested an older man wearing colonel's tabs.

Tammy shrugged again, saying, "Pender would approve."

Everyone looked sharply at her, surprised to see Tammy being so free with the approval of a dead man, whose opinions had split the system and all but depopulated a planet. "Boss met him on the last day," Tammy explained evenly, "and liked him a lot. Told us not to shoot him."

Men laughed at that, but it put Pender's authority behind keeping him alive. Tammy added evenly, "Pender ordered me to give up and go with him, and to recruit him if possible. He was my best hope of getting here."

All news to Derek, who did not join in the general hilarity at how easily Tammy had included him in the plans of a mass murderer. Mia had feared that without him Tammy would be alone among men with guns, showing just how right a Greenie could be. However, dear sweet Mia ne-

glected to say what Derek was supposed to do surrounded by all those guns, especially with Tammy on the other side.

"But why listen to me?" Tammy asked. "You can hear the Boss himself."

Pointing with the remote, Tammy triggered a holo, and Pender himself suddenly appeared, looking fit and relaxed. Grinning, he addressed the dwindling faithful, saying cheerfully, "Guess I'm dead, otherwise you wouldn't be seeing this. Funny, being dead is not near so bad as I imagined. Only drawback is that I can't see or hear you. That's why I ordered up this holo of Monument Valley, so we could all be seeing the same thing. Pretty, isn't she? And some day Harmonia could still look like this. . . ."

Pender stared into the virtual distance, a dead man admiring a fake landscape, then turned back to the business at hand. "Well, even in hell there is still work to do. Code name for this project is *Mjollnir*. . . ."

Pender's holo proceeded to rattle off coordinates that Derek's nav-chip identified as a location in outer system near the leading Trojan point of the gas giant Cadmus, a spot intersected by the orbit of an asteroid called Cassandra. Why Pender should be so concerned to pass on this data was a mystery to Derek—but the reasons were bound to be bad.

When he was done, Pender paused to survey the holandscape one last time, knowing that having delivered his message, he really was dead, no longer able to affect the world of the living. In fact, each passing second left him farther behind. Pender's smile widened, and he said to no one in particular, "Well, it was worth it. Now give 'em one more good whack for me."

In a blink, Pender was gone, and they were all staring into the empty holandscape of Monument Valley. Surveying the tall spires and painted desert, Derek wondered if this was someplace on Earth, but did not dare ask. Everyone else seemed to understand immediately what Pender meant, and what was going to happen. They asked him only one ominous question before returning him to the sealed cubicle. "How long before all humans are totally off the planet?"

"Not long," Derek admitted. Human evacuation was his specialty, and there was small point in lying so long as he was wearing a slave collar. "Ten days at most, more likely a week. But you can never be sure you have gotten everyone."

Militiamen got a grim laugh out of that. Then Tammy took him back to his sealed cubicle, and he was shut off from the cosmos. Time passed, precisely recorded by his nav-chip. Food arrived, and a personal recycler in the corner shipped his wastes to hydroponics. Halfway to Cadmus' leading Trojan point, the drive fields reversed and the Skylark started decelerating. *Eclipse* would have to decelerate as well, in order to match orbits. Working out high-g trajectories in his head, Derek decided that *Eclipse* could cut the distance considerably, but still would not catch up until they were long past the leading Trojan point. Whatever was happening there, *Eclipse* could not stop it.

So much for the Navy. If anyone was going to stop the Humanists, it had to be him. Terrific. He had finally found his own people, only to discover that they were homicidal lunatics. Mia thought that most of human misery came from inventing weapons, and by now Derek was willing to agree. No sane Greenie would carry out what looked like a suicidal mis-

sion of mass-destruction at the behest of some dead murderer. Male or female, young or old, stupid or smart, the first thing a Greenie would ask was, "Why in the world are we doing this?"

Yet no one on that mesa top questioned anything, except to pointedly ask when the "humans" would be off the planet. Pender's people were probably already offplanet, leaving a sprinkling of peaceful independent types like the Presleites, who had somehow managed to avoid the war and its aftermath—so far. Mia was probably already down there too, taking samples from the hippos and worrying about what had happened to him. While these maniacs plotted something fatal for her and every Greenie on the planet. Not to mention all those hippos.

Acceleration fell almost to zero when they reached a spot corresponding to the current location of Cassandra, a two-hundred-klick rock named for a Trojan princess. Cassandra meant "Entangler of Men." Or so his nav-chip said. She had certainly entangled him.

Tammy came to get him, his remote in hand, the stinger in a hip holster, and a smirk on her face. He tried to lodge a strenuous protest, but she pressed MUTE, saying, "We don't have time to argue. Right now we are in a sealed room, and can't be overheard. Outside, we have to be ready to act together. Okay?"

Unable to speak, and not knowing exactly what Tammy meant, Derek nodded anyway. What choice did he have?

"Good." Tammy pressed UNMUTE. "So, have you guessed what project *Mjollnir* is about?"

"Pender wants you to smash this asteroid into Harmonia, killing as many Greenies as you can." Why else rendezvous with a useless rock far away from anywhere?

"Right." Tammy nodded grimly. "Thor's hammer, smashing our enemies to bits."

"But even if you could anchor this Skylark to the rock, you could never get past *Eclipse*." An armed merchant cruiser carried special landing teams trained to liberate hijacked ships, and root out slaver bases.

Tammy shook her head. "There is no need to get past *Eclipse*. Buried in the rock is a high-g tug, the *Atlas*, originally used to tow ice comets for terraforming, but hidden here ever since. Once the tug has been programmed, the Skylark will take off, drawing the *Eclipse* into deep space."

Derek had to admit that it would probably work. Cassandra was a dense stony-iron asteroid, perfect for hiding the powered-down tug. With the Skylark speeding away, *Eclipse* would continue the chase, telling the Greenies to check out Cassandra. By the time low-g Greenie ships arrived, the asteroid would be accelerating downsun and impossible to stop. Cassandra striking at high acceleration would almost split Harmony in half, destroying every structure, and blowing a huge hole in the thin atmosphere blanketing the world in dust and ash. Only algae would survive. He bitterly told Tammy, "I believed you, when you told that jury that they could stop the killing."

"I absolutely meant that," Tammy insisted.

"Then how can you be doing this?" Derek demanded.

"I am trying to stop it," Tammy protested, looking like she thought it

should have been obvious. "That's why I need you. All I have is a Humanities PhD, and I know absolutely nothing about piloting a high-g tug."

"So you want *me* to?" Derek could hardly believe what he was hearing. "Dragging a runaway asteroid behind us. . . ."

"To keep it from hitting Harmonia," Tammy reminded him. "And maybe save your Greenie girlfriend."

Mia was undoubtedly dirtside by now, but that just made it all the worse. "How could you not tell me?" he demanded. "How could you have let things get this far?"

"I had to be first to get here," Tammy told him primly. "Pender sent back-up messages in case mine didn't get through. And if I'd told you my plans, you wouldn't have helped."

No lie. He stared in exasperation at the Earthwoman, aghast at what she had done. "Why not just turn them in?"

"And give the Greenies one more victory to gloat over?" Tammy looked disgusted. "Too many women and kids died from their 'precision' bombing for me to do that. This is something that humans had to do. If Greenies could do it, we wouldn't be having this talk."

Derek had nothing to say. He would have gladly left all this to Leo's light battalion, but maybe he was too used to bioconstructs doing his dirty work. SuperChimps to do the heavy lifting. Leo for the dangerous stuff. Bugs to take out the toxic waste. Dear sweet Mia to make his meals and share his bed.

"This is all so easy for you—isn't it?" Tammy asked. "Having the moral high ground, while we ordinary humans do the suffering."

"Not really," Derek told her, having seen far more grief and mayhem than he had ever imagined—none of it of his making, but folks still expected him to *do* something about it. "It's damned hard on me at times."

"Me too," Tammy agreed, handing him his sleep grenade, at the same time giving his hand a warm squeeze. "Back in Pender's bunker, you were so anxious to know who I was, and how you could help me. Well, this is who I am, and now is when I need you."

Well said. He took the grenade and the squeeze, noting Tammy was wearing his hypo-rings. By now, he knew that there were reasons why negotiators did not consort with the enemy, not if they meant to remain neutral.

Derek followed Tammy out of the cell and into the Skylark's lounge, which was no longer atop a desert mesa, showing a seascape instead. The tug's crew was coming aboard, looking more like tired mariners emerging from the sea than vacuum hands coming out of hiding. Two large armed men in militia uniforms waited by the lock to escort them onto the tug. Feeling their gaze on him, Derek realized that Tammy had them perfectly fooled. They were all set to leap to her aid, while she walked stinger on hip into the tug, planning to betray them. Having been there himself, Derek could sympathize with their upcoming surprise.

Inside the lock, the ocean motif was replaced by the standard ship's airlock. As soon as the lock closed, and started to cycle, Tammy opened an emergency kit on the wall and took out two oxygen masks, putting one on and handing Derek the other. He put on the mask and set off his sleep grenade. One shocked militiaman reached out to stop him, but Tammy

seized his wrist, triggering her hypo-ring. He joined his sleeping companion on the deck.

When the lock opened, the two of them stepped into the deserted tug. Decoupling the lock manually, Derek dashed to the command couch. Without bothering to buckle himself in, he slammed the drive into full acceleration, shooting sunward, and, at the same time, rotating the whole rock to port. Fields could not fully compensate, and Derek had to cling to the couch with one hand, while snagging Tammy with the other, keeping her from tumbling into the controls.

Hanging onto Tammy, he stopped the roll at 180 degrees, so that the mass of the asteroid was between them and the *Skylark* as they dropped toward the inner system. Fields stabilized, returning cabin gravity to 1-g, and Tammy landed in his lap.

He looked down at her, and she looked up at him. Suddenly they were safe, and alone. No armed Humanist militia. No Leo and his light battalion. Just the two of them, safe, secure, and together, with two hundred klicks of rock and iron between them and the men Tammy had so neatly betrayed. Tammy sat up in his lap and kissed him, a long lingering kiss that showed that she had been waiting for it almost as long as he had. Her mouth felt cool and exciting, not as delicate as Mia's, or as eager to please, but with a wild willfulness that Derek had never tasted before. Their lips parted, and Tammy smiled, asking him, "Was that as good as a Greenie?"

"You are nothing like a Greenie," he told her. No Greenie girl had ever put him through half of what Tammy had done to him—but then, no one had ever suggested that Earth women were easy. Especially Humanities majors from the wilds of Portland, or Eugene. But that just made him want her all the more—too bad that frantic calls were coming from *Eclipse*, wanting to know why one of the leading Trojans had broken lose, and was accelerating rapidly downsun. Speed-of-light lag meant that the Greenies did not even know anything had happened—yet.

"Don't answer that," Tammy told him, shutting off the comlink.

He reached out to call *Eclipse*, to explain the situation and send them after the *Skylark*, which was headed outsystem at high acceleration. But Tammy stabbed a button on the remote, and his arms went limp, nerve-blocked by his slave collar. Tammy shook her head, saying, "Told you not to answer. Let them stew a bit, we need time to ourselves."

When he started to protest, Tammy pushed MUTE and kissed him again. His anger at being helpless was mollified by what she did with her tongue. Then she pushed UNMUTE, and asked, "Was that not better than talking to the Navy?"

It was, but Derek resented the lack of mobility, demanding, "Turn my arms back on."

Tammy sat up in his lap, smiling gleefully. "Only if you promise to be bad."

Greenie girls did not treat you like this, and, for the first time in his life, he truly wanted to lay hands on a woman, and none too gently either. "Come on, turn me on."

"Whatever you say." Tammy pressed a button, and one body part leaped alert. Squirming suggestively, she ground her rear into his lap, asking, "There, how about that?"

Still not what he wanted. Derek pleaded, "Let me use my hands and legs." Tammy looked serenely at him, stripping off her hypo-rings. "Only if you promise to quit acting like a Greenie."

"Damn you." Derek could not believe what this woman had put him through.

"That's better." Tammy turned the rest of him on. Until *Eclipse* matched orbits, they were utterly alone, two hundred light-years from Earth; a splendid place for getting acquainted. Derek discovered that despite all her strange actions and dangerous ways, Tammy was indeed just like a Greenie girl on the inside.

Eclipse brought the idyll to an end. Naval officers, some of them human, came to take over the tug and send Cassandra sailing outsystem, where the wayward Trojan would no longer be a threat. Then they returned Derek to Harmonia, where he and Tammy got a royal reception from grateful Greenies, who could not do enough to show how thankful they were. Making it the perfect moment to press his claim to the Presleite property, and to get a promise that the Presleites could return to it, along with anyone not actually convicted of war crimes. Which the Greenies readily agreed to, being eternally optimistic about humans' ability to better themselves.

Derek was there when the first shuttle landed, standing in the rain on a low plateau in the central massif overlooking the green Hyperborean swamps. Women in black bouffant hairdos, and men with sideburns, shades, and white dinner jackets trooped out of the shuttle—all armed, just in case. With them came their children, as well as Brad and the other orphans from among Pender's people, like the teenage crew chief that Tammy had gotten acquitted. And any adults who were willing to live among Greenies and Presleites.

Immensely happy with how things were going, Derek stood at the base of "his" mountain, surveying the sweep of changing landscape from the bare mountain peak above to the emerald swamp lapping at the lower slopes. Someday that swamp would be a blue sea, and the mountain flanks would be lowland jungle, blending into highland forest, then alpine pasture. Air would become breathable all the way to the top, so the whole mountain and the surrounding highland rim would be habitable. Only the crater floor, where Gekkos had built their cities, would be lost to the sea. That part of Pender's plan had worked admirably. His deluge would go on for decades, and the Gekkos would never get a second chance.

Derek saw a lone slim Greenie, wearing nothing but a gold sarong and a grin, walking nonchalantly up from where the hippo herds were grazing. Zoom lenses showed Derek that it was Mia coming cheerfully up to congratulate him. She stopped right before him, and rose on her green toes, kissing him warmly. "I knew you would do right," she told him, "and keep Tammy safe."

"Not everything went totally as expected," Derek admitted ruefully. Doing right nearly came out all wrong.

"Don't worry." Mia kissed him again. "I told you I wasn't done with you. And I dearly want to meet Tammy too."

Why did Derek think his troubles had just begun? O

CAMOUFLAGE

by Joe Haldeman

Ace, \$23.95 (hc)

ISBN: 0-441-01161-6

Haldeman gives us a near-future version of one of the classic SF themes: the alien shape-shifter in our midst. He begins with a clear account of the alien's origin on a world subjected to such extremes of environment that it becomes incredibly tough, for all practical purposes impossible to kill. An accomplished shapeshifter, it arrives on Earth in the prehuman past, taking on the form of aquatic top predators to survive. When it finally comes ashore, in the early 1930s, it has no notion of what it means to be human.

The creature's first act is to kill, then to assume the shape of, a young man it meets on a beach in southern California. At this point, it can learn only by imitating the humans around it, a pattern that leads to its being diagnosed as an amnesiac. Its victim's parents are rich enough to afford the best care, including a live-in nurse. Under that regime, it quickly absorbs large chunks of human culture and language, from music to sex (into which the nurse initiates it). But it is still not human, as it quickly proves when it rapes and badly injures another woman brought in to teach it art. Sent to an insane asylum, it begins to learn the hard way some of the constraints on behavior in human society. Released from the asylum, it goes to college, then joins

the Marines—just in time for the opening shots of World War II.

Parallel with this story line, Haldeman spins one set in our near future, in which a team of underwater recovery specialists is commissioned to bring up a mysterious artifact—one the reader soon knows is the spaceship in which the shapeshifter arrived on Earth. Recovered and brought ashore in Samoa, the artifact displays mysterious properties—its weight is off the scale for any known material, and it cannot be marked by any tool available. Intrigued, the scientists continue to investigate with the help of a NASA team, which quietly places a nuclear device near the spaceship. The device can be exploded if the government decides the artifact is a danger.

The two plots gradually come together, as the shapeshifter acquires enough human culture and knowledge to achieve a fair degree of success, masquerading as a university professor in oceanography, a discipline for which its past incarnations as a sea creature obviously have prepared it. By now, Haldeman has also dropped in several references to another shapeshifter, one that has spent several millennia in human form—as often as not, as a warrior. And, almost inevitably, both become aware of the artifact on Samoa at about the same time.

Haldeman orchestrates the two plots into a cat and mouse game with one of the main players care-

fully disguised right up to the end. (And he makes excellent use of the fact that, once the main premise becomes clear, just about every time somebody new comes onstage, readers will start wondering whether they are who they appear to be.) In the process, he gives readers close-up looks at Samoa, the Bataan Death March, and several other places and events that stretch the reader's awareness of the world outside comfortable everyday experience.

A well-paced and enjoyable performance by one of the most consistently inventive writers in the field.

BROKEN ANGELS
by Richard K. Morgan
Del Rey, \$14.95 (tp)
ISBN: 0-345-45771-4

Like *Altered Carbon*, to which it is a sequel, Morgan's second novel is essentially a far-future cross between space opera and military SF.

Takeshi Kovacs is a former U.N. envoy, now working as a mercenary for a planetary government trying to fight off a revolution. In this future, soldiers can be killed—but it is a relatively easy job to retrieve their personalities (and skill sets) to be incorporated into a new body—“resleeved,” they call it. Only the complete destruction of the stack—a sort of internal black box affixed near the brain stem—can kill someone permanently. Those with particularly valuable talents and knowledge are likely to be resleeved almost indefinitely—at least, until they burn out from overuse.

When we pick up Kovacs, he is recovering from injuries, and not particularly looking forward to getting back into action. That's the point at which a stranger, Jan Schneider,

contacts him with what looks like a lucrative offer. Archaeologists appear to have discovered a Martian spaceship—a remnant of a vanished race far more advanced than ours. The first of its kind ever found, it is incredibly valuable, and it could well be Kovacs's ticket out of the war zone. Because every corporate shark on the planet is going to go after the spaceship, Schneider wants to enlist Kovacs's military and negotiating skills to give himself a chance to recover it—and live long enough to realize his profit.

That sets off a complex plot, in which Kovacs kidnaps the archaeologist from a prisoner-of-war camp, recruits a team of mercenaries to carry out the recovery of the spaceship, and cuts a deal with a corporate sponsor. Big business on Sanc-
tion IV is, to put it mildly, predatory; Kovacs has to off several bodyguards just in the process of getting his sponsor interested. No big deal; they can all be resleeved, if their skills justify it. But it quickly becomes clear that somebody is very interested in seeing that Kovacs and his partners don't get to the Martian ship.

But Kovacs has been hired to do a job, and he's going to do it, even though he's AWOL from the mercenary company he's under contract to. It's just as well that he and his crew are effectively immortal, because there's a lethal level of fallout all around the archaeological site. On top of that, someone has seeded the nearby area with military nanobots—a new kind that adapt to whatever defenses they're exposed to, and keep coming until they win. In a sense, that absolute refusal to be stopped makes them an echo of Kovacs himself.

Gritty space opera, with some in-

teresting twists on the theme of limited immortality.

PRISONER OF THE IRON TOWER

by Sarah Ash

Bantam, \$23.00 (hc)

ISBN: 0-553-38211-X

This second book of Ash's fantasy trilogy, "The Tears of Artamon," is set in a society based on Russian history and folklore.

In the opening book, Gavril, a young artist, discovered that he was hereditary ruler of Azhkendar. Following his apparent destiny, he repelled the invading forces of Prince Eugene of Tielen, saving his country. But the price of victory was allowing himself to be possessed by the dragon-demon Drakhaoul, whose thirst for human blood made Gavril a tortured monster. By the end of the first book he had thrown off the dragon.

As this second book begins, Prince Eugene sends a new invading force to Azhkendar. Powerless to resist, Gavril is captured and sent to the Iron Tower, a prison for the criminally insane. Eugene believes himself to be an enlightened prince, bringing the benefits of civilization to the entire Rossiyan people, whom he intends to unite under his power. To that end he has brought together the five pieces of a giant ruby taken from the eye of a sculptured dragon that guards the gate through which the Drakhaoul entered their world, the magical symbol of the nation's unity.

Left behind after Gavril's capture are his faithful retainers, now enslaved by the Tielen. Also stranded in the aftermath are the spirit-singer Kiukiu, who has fallen in love with Gavril, and Gavril's mother Elysia, a brilliant painter. Both

quickly learn that in the absence of Gavril, their place in the kingdom is close to the bottom; and those who have displaced them are eager to keep things that way. Both realize that their only chance is to leave; Kiukiu to the Teilen capital, in search of Gavril, Elysia to her home in Smarna, a southern province.

Meanwhile, Eugene's rise to power has led him to take as bride Princess Astasia of the deposed Orlov dynasty, who finds herself unable to love her royal husband. Eugene essentially ignores her, in any case; his attention is focused on his attempts to unite the Rossiyan empire, to deal with a rebellion in Smarna, and to wrest the secret of Gavril's power, which had left the prince seriously wounded in the first assault on Askhendar. And to add one more complication, Eugene's court necromancer has been undertaking dangerous experiments in an attempt to accumulate power of his own.

The return of the demon-dragon Drakhaoul, as powerful and hungry as ever, sets off the new crisis, and frees Gavril from his prison. Fleeing southward, Gavril aids the Smarnan rebels, then decides to rid himself of the dragon forever. To do that, he must return the rubies—the tears of Artamon—to the eye of the carved dragon from which they were stolen. Of course, that turns out to be both more complex and more dangerous than anyone expects.

Ash places interesting characters against a richly drawn background, then runs them through an exhausting gamut of experience, from torture to exhilaration. The Russian flavor is in itself sufficiently exotic to set this one apart from the run of the mill fantasy.

ONE KING, ONE SOLDIER

by Alexander C. Irvine

Del Rey, \$13.95 (tp)

ISBN: 0-345-46696-9

Irvine pulls together baseball, a Grail quest, and the Beat poets in a fantasy that jumps between the late nineteenth century and the post-World War II era.

Lance Porter is an American soldier wounded in the Korean War and shipped to San Francisco for mustering out. There, unexpectedly, he finds himself at the cusp of the incipient Beat movement, in particular the poet Jack Spicer (1925-65), whose use of Arthurian legend and SF imagery make him a natural for transplanting into Irvine's fantasy world. Lance also learns that his girlfriend Ellie has unexpectedly come to Berkeley to meet him, although for reasons he can't quite understand, he can't bring himself to follow through and see her.

But he does meet another woman, Gwen, who immediately takes him to bed—then, almost equally quickly, seems to drop him. An old friend who shows up finally tips Lance off to the strange destiny into which he has fallen: reenactment of the Grail legend in a new century. This brings into perspective two other stories that are developed in parallel with Lance's: that of Arthur Rimbaud, the French symbolist poet who died obscurely in Africa in 1891, and George Gibson, a minor league baseball player (to judge by chronology, not the George "Moon" Gibson who played for the Pirates in the early 1900s). Both, as it turns out, were involved in the grail quest—and, as Irvine develops the story, both the poet and the baseball player became rivals for the possession of the sacred object.

As with any retelling of the Grail story, Irvine faces the dilemma of making something fresh out of the old McGuffin without betraying its essence. Luckily, there is no single canonical version; his predecessors run the gamut from Tennyson and Wagner to Samuel R. Delany (*Nova*), Bernard Malamud (*The Natural*), and Monty Python. Even better, the game lies in the quest more than in the object, although the Grail must remain worthy of the supreme effort its seekers expend, or else the story risks devolving into parody. Irvine plays many familiar quasi-historical cards, from the extirpation of the Templars to the relocation of the Ark to the hills of Ethiopia. But despite the presence of the manic Beats and other apparently light elements at the beginning of the story, it aspires to a real seriousness of tone, as the horrors of European colonialism counterpoint Gibson's journey across Africa in search of Rimbaud and the Grail.

On the whole, a very powerful modern reworking of one of the central myths of fantasy. Especially recommended for readers with an affinity for baseball, the Beats, or both.

CROSSROADS: Tales of the**Southern Literary Fantastic**

Edited by F. Brett Cox

and Andy Duncan

Tor, \$24.95 (hc)

ISBN: 0-765-30813-4

Here's an idea that seems natural enough: an anthology of stories by some of the talented SF/Fantasy writers living in the South. After all, as the editors point out, a significant number of the seminal writers in our field have southern roots—including such eminent pre-

decessors as Edgar Allan Poe, Joel Chandler Harris, and William Faulkner, as well as a pretty good cross section of current writers. It's from the latter crop that this anthology is drawn.

The contributors include such regular award-collectors as John Kessel, Michael Swanwick, Gene Wolfe, Michael Bishop, and Duncan himself, along with Jack McDevitt, Scott Edelman, Ian McDowell, Bud Webster—twenty-seven in all. And the majority are undeniably southern, either by current residence or by origin. (There appear to be a couple of ringers, such as Swanwick, a prominent Philadelphian.) But the southern focus is more a question of subject matter than of the writers' home town.

Gene Wolfe's "Houston, 1943" tells about a small boy whose nightmares recycle Peter Pan into the stuff of horror. Edelman shows an irony-impaired time traveler condemned by advanced aliens to monitor the early life of Randy Newman to prevent him from straying into earnestness. McDevitt looks at the future of a small town after the abandonment of the space program in the wake of a plague. Bud Webster portrays a second death of Christ, this time as a derelict in a homeless shelter. Honoree Fanonne Jeffers and Kalamu Ya Salaam are among the African American writers who give the book perspective by showing the South from the point of view of the oppressed. Salaam's "Alabama," with its reminder that the days of lynching are after all not so far away, is chilling.

While not all the stories reach the same level—it would be something of a miracle if they did—the best here are solid testimonies to

the strength of the southern storytelling tradition, and to the ability of SF and fantasy to adopt a regional dialect to the advantage of both.

THE KID WHO NAMED PLUTO And the Stories of Other Extraordinary Young People in Science
by Marc McCutcheon
Illustrated by Jon Cannell
Chronicle Books, \$15.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-8118-3770-X

The subtitle pretty much sums up the major appeal of this YA science book: stories of young people who made some contribution to science.

The title essay, for example, concerns Venetia Burney, an eleven-year-old English girl who, in 1933, submitted a name for the newly discovered planet at the outer edge of the solar system. Inspired by a great uncle who had named Phobos and Deimos, the moons of Mars, she studied the names of other bodies of the solar system, and the mythological stories from which the names had been chosen, before proposing a name—Pluto—that not only fit into the existing structure, but subtly, in its first two letters, honored Percival Lowell, who had spent much of his career fruitlessly searching for the new planet.

At first, some of the other choices seem a bit far-fetched; every inventor or scientist was once young, and a fair number of them were inspired in their careers by something that happened in their youth. But as it happens, a number of people actually did make some key breakthrough at an early age.

Emily Rosa is probably not a household name, but at age nine,

she devised a simple experiment by which she debunked several practitioners of "therapeutic touch." Brought up by skeptical parents, she applied their principles to a test in which the practitioners were required to sense which hand she held out; their success rate was well below expectation. Her results were published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*—an accomplishment many seasoned researchers might envy.

Philo Farnsworth, who went on to acquire 165 patents, was only eighteen when he jotted down an electrical diagram. It was the key innovation that eventually led to the development of television: a method for breaking a visual image into individual pixels that could be transmitted one at a time. While Farnsworth met with only mixed success in the world of commercial electronic engineering, he was eventually recognized as the "inventor of television."

Another inventor to whom science fiction readers will easily relate is Robert Goddard, the father of American rocket science. Again, while Goddard's real work was done as an adult (his most famous

article was published when he was thirty-eight), he achieved a key vision at age seventeen while climbing a backyard cherry tree. By that date, he had already made several abortive attempts at flying devices (this was in 1899, pre-Wright Brothers), but that day, he hit upon the notion of a machine that could fly to Mars, the idea that was to drive him for the rest of his career.

Then there's Isaac Asimov, who surely needs no introduction to readers of this magazine. A book-worm in his youth, he became one of the most prolific and successful of writers, in fiction and non-fiction alike. Again, the book focuses more on his youthful inspiration than on his mature achievement (which, to pick a nit, has more to do with making science accessible than with advancing it directly). But that's the point here—to suggest to young readers that following their dreams, with sufficient application and ingenuity, can bring results that nobody can dismiss as kid stuff. This one might be a good gift for any young person with a budding interest in a scientific field, whether it be dinosaurs, cryptology, or rocket science. O

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

With the holidays winding down, it's time to think about getting out for cons. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

JANUARY 2005

7-9—GAFilk. For info, write: Box 702, Alpharetta GA 30009. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) gafilf.org. (E-mail) registration@gafilf.org. Con will be held in: Atlanta GA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Holiday Inn Airport North. Guests will include: Sloan, Wachowiak, Savitsky. SF/fantasy folksinging.

14-16—Arisia, Bldg. 600, #322, 1 Kendall Sq., Cambridge MA 02139. arisia.org. Park Plaza, Boston MA. B. Hambly.

14-16—RustyCon, Box 27075, Seattle WA 98165. rustycon.com. SeaTac Radisson. R. Steve Adams, IKV T'mar.

14-16—ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. (770) 578-8451. Chattanooga TN. Larry Niven, Chris Bunch.

21-23—ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107. stilyagi.org. Troy MI. E. Bull, W. Shetterly, D. Grime, C. Ready.

28-30—VeriCon, HRSFA, 4 Univ. Hall, Cambridge MA 02138. vericon.org. Harvard U. SF, fantasy, gaming, anime.

FEBRUARY 2005

4-6—UK Filk Con, c/o Weingart, 263 Sprucewood Dr., Levittown NY 11756. contabile.org.uk. In England. Music.

4-6—AllCon, Box 177194, Irving TX 75019. all-con.org. Sterling Hotel, Dallas TX. Barry Diamond, Adam Hughes.

11-13—CapriCon, Box 60085, Chicago IL 60660. capricon.org. Sheraton, Arlington Heights IL. J. Hogan, S. Garrity.

11-13—FarPoint, 11708 Troy Ct., Waldorf MD 20601. farpoint.com. Marriott, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD. Media SF.

18-20—Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 776-3243 (fax). boskone.org. Sheraton, Boston MA. Card.

18-20—VisionCon, Box 1415, Springfield MO 65801. (417) 886-7219. Clarion. Bedell, Capps, Gorham, Strain, Turner.

18-20—Gallifrey, Box 3021, N. Hollywood CA 91609. gallifreyone.com. Los Angeles CA. Venue, guests TBA. Dr. Who.

24-27—Left Coast Crime, 2626 N. Mesa #261, El Paso TX 79902. leftcoastcrime2005.com. Paco I. Taibo. Mysteries.

25-27—Redemption, 26 King's Meadow View, Weatherby LS22 7FX, UK. conventions.org.uk/redemption. Bab 5.

MARCH 2005

4-6—Pottatch, c/o Box 5328, Berkeley CA 94704. pottatch-sf.org. Ramada Plaza, San Francisco CA. Written SF.

11-13—PortmeirCon, 6 of 1, Box 66, Ipswich IP2 9PZ, UK. portmeiricon.com. Portmeirion UK. "Prisoner" TV show.

18-20—LunaCon, 847A 2nd Ave. #234, New York, NY 10017. lunacon.org. Sheraton, Meadowlands NJ.

18-20—TechniCon, Box 256, Blacksburg VA 24063. technicon.org. No more information available at press time.

25-28—UK Nat'l. Con, c/o J. Dowd, 4 Burnside Ave., Sheffield S8 9FR, UK. paragon2.org.uk. Hinckley England.

25-28—NZ Nat'l. Con, Box 13-574, Johnsonville, Wellington, New Zealand. icon.sfs.org.nz. O.S. Card, B. Geradts.

AUGUST 2005

4-8—Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk. Glasgow Scotland. \$170/£95.

SEPTEMBER 2005

1-5—CascadiaCon, Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. seattle2005.org. The NASFiC, while WorldCon's in Glasgow. \$85+.

AUGUST 2006

23-27—LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. info@laconiv.com. Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. WorldCon. \$150+.

AUGUST 2007

30-Sep. 3—Nippon2007, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. nippon2007.org. Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. \$160+.

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NEXT ISSUE

FEBRUARY ISSUE

Nebula Award-winner **Esther M. Friesner**, one of the best-known writers of funny fantasy in the business, returns in a decidedly *not* funny, more somber mood next issue to give us our lead story for March, taking us through the deceptively pastoral rolling hills and fields of the nineteenth century English countryside for a strange and momentous encounter in a rural manor-house that will determine just who—or *what*—is “The Fraud.”

ALSO IN FEBRUARY

Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy Award-winner **Gene Wolfe** invites you to stoop and pick up “The Card”—one that could change your life forever; popular and prolific writer **Mary Rosenblum** whisks us aloft for a surprising—and suspenseful—look at life in orbit, in “Green Shift”; new writer **Lori Selke**, making her *Asimov’s* debut, invites us along for an unscheduled tour of “The Dodo Factory”; **R. Neube** visits an impoverished backwoods future America where the spirit of entrepreneurship is still alive, in a grisly sort of way, in “Organs R Us”; new writer **David D. Levine**, making his *Asimov’s* debut, takes us to a distant alien planet where a hapless human salesman must learn to overcome entirely new categories of sales resistance, in “Tk’tk’tk” (no, my fingers didn’t slip on the keys; that’s the *title!*); **Bud Sparhawk**, a regular at our sister magazine, *Analog*, visits these pages to spin a hard-hitting and remorseless story of total war with an implacable alien enemy and the kind of thing humans have to do to survive it, in “Bright Red Star”; **Steven Utley**, whose “Silurian Tales” have been among the most acclaimed stories in the genre for more than a decade now, gives us a ringside seat for “The Wave-Function Collapse”; and new writer **Matthew Hughes** returns with a sly look at a Great Man having an encounter that is probably *not* going to make the history books, in “The Devil You Don’t.”

EXCITING FEATURES

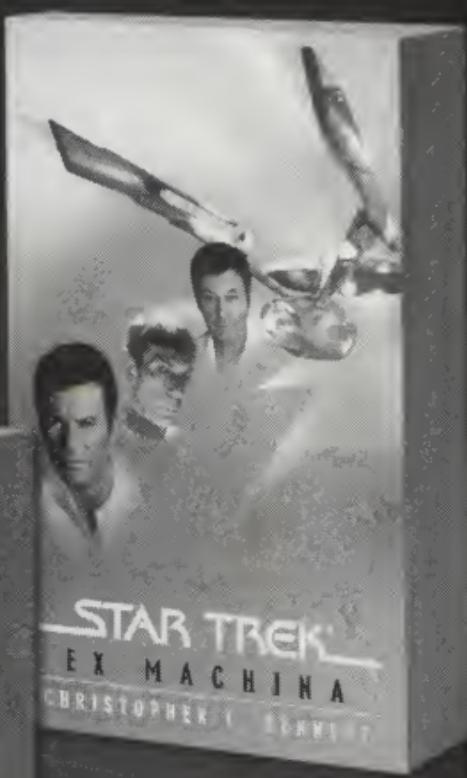
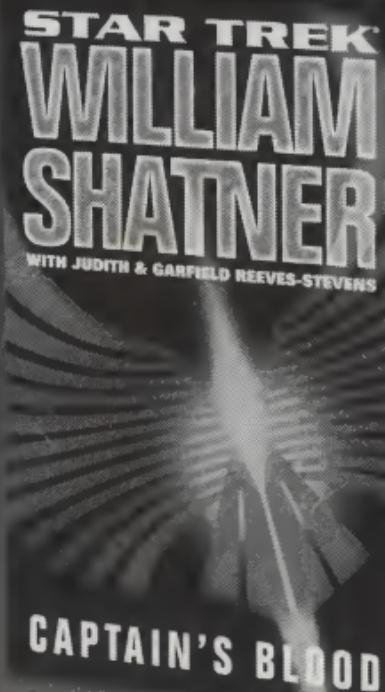
Robert Silverberg’s “Reflections” column muses about being “A Pair of Ragged Jaws”; and **Paul Di Filippo** brings us “On Books”; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our March 2005 issue on sale on your newsstand on February 1, 2004. Or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up for you next year (you can also subscribe to *Asimov’s* online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, www.asimovs.com).

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